DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 374 CE 082 454

AUTHOR Suda, Liz
TITLE Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy: International Perspectives for the 21st Century. Project No. 2, 2000 Report.
INSTITUTION Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium, Melbourne (Victoria). Victorian Centre.
SPONS AGENCY Australian Dept. of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.
ISBN ISBN-1-876768-29-0
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 66p.
AVAILABLE FROM Language Australia, GPO Box 372F, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia ($13.20 Australian). Tel: 61 3 9926 4794; Fax: 61 3 9926 4780; e-mail: davet@la.ames.vic.edu.au; Web site: http://sunsite.anu.edu.au/language-australia/publishing/.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Case Studies; Developed Nations; *Educational Change; *Educational Innovation; Educational Research; Family Literacy; Foreign Countries; Global Approach; Independent Study; *Lifelong Learning; Literacy Education; Numeracy; Technological Advancement
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development; Spain; Study Circles; Sweden; United Kingdom; United States

ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from a review of international trends in adult literacy and numeracy to identify innovative programs of interest to Australia. Section 1 offers definitions of literacy. Section 2 outlines the international context. Section 3 has case studies of innovative approaches in four Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries. The United Kingdom case study highlights the government's commitment to addressing challenges facing the country to remain competitive in a globalized economy and the Learning Age program. The United States case study details reforms needed to increase literacy levels and lifelong learning skills and provides data on provision that uses the family as an important part of the education process. The Sweden case study illustrates how a long tradition of popularly based education for adults has resulted in a learning culture with 80 percent of the population participating in some form of further education. Of particular interest are study circles in adult education. The Spain case study describes Dialogic Literacy Circles, self-directed group learning. Section 4 explores lessons and these challenges for Australia: a policy for lifelong learning; pedagogies for lifelong learning; lifelong literacy for learning; adult literacy; dialogic practice; new technologies and online learning; and family and community learning. Section 5 recommends future directions for Australia in policy, pedagogy, research, and resources. (Contains 62 references and 26 Web sites.) (YLB)

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ED 458 374

Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium

ALNARC

Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy

International Perspectives for the 21st Century

Liz Suda

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Adult Literacy and Numeracy
Australian Research Consortium
Victoria University

Project No. 2, 2000 Report

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International Perspectives for the 21st Century

Liz Suda

Adult Literacy and Numeracy
Australian Research Consortium
Victoria University

Project No. 2, 2000 Report

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(ALNARC)

ISBN 1 876768 29 0

The research in this report was funded under the ANTA Adult Literacy National Project by the Commonwealth of Australia through the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Published for ALNARC by Language Australia Ltd
The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia
GPO Box 372F
Melbourne Vic 3001

All enquiries in relation to this publication should be addressed to:
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Executive Summary

To the average person in the street, being literate means the ability to read and write written text. However, economic globalisation, sophisticated communication technologies, increasing cultural diversity and the advent of the 'information age' make more complex literacy capability a necessity in one's personal, civic and working life.

In responding to these changing circumstances, the Victorian centre of ALNARC conducted a review of international trends in adult literacy and numeracy with the aim of identifying innovative programs that may be of interest to Australia. The process of identifying examples of innovative programs required an understanding of the context within which these innovations were taking place. The case studies of four different countries are therefore contextualised within significant global debates.

The overarching concept linking many of these debates is the idea that all citizens must be prepared to engage in lifelong learning in order to effectively participate in a rapidly changing world. In order to engage in lifelong learning, citizens must have developed literacy and numeracy skills, an appreciation of different kinds of learning and the willingness and motivation to participate in the process of learning. The ability to use new technologies is seen as a vital part of this practice.

Governments the world over are faced with the challenge of ensuring that their citizens are able to effectively participate in work, civic and family life. The report of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) *Literacy in the Information Age* (OECD 2000) revealed that one in five Australians do not have the necessary literacy skills to effectively participate in the information age. These findings present a real challenge to the urgent need for lifelong learning practices. A comparative analysis of different countries reveals that the Nordic countries have higher levels of literacy than countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.

The case studies of four different countries, the United Kingdom, the United States, Sweden and Spain, show how the issue of lifelong learning and the development of the abilities necessary for effective participation in work, family and civic life are being addressed in these countries.

In the United Kingdom, the Blair Government has embarked on an ambitious program of reforming the education system. The *Learning Age* in the UK has provided valuable data on the policy development processes necessary to implement such reforms. This case study highlights the commitment of the government in addressing many of the challenges facing the United Kingdom in remaining competitive in a globalised economy. The flagship for these reforms is the University for Industry, a virtual university which is accessible to people who work, live in remote areas or are unable to attend classes for other reasons. Considerable resources have been provided to ensure the success of the *Learning Age* in the UK, including a massive increase in funding for literacy, numeracy

and basic skills necessary for effective participation in the information age.

The literacy field of the United States conducted a national summit of literacy during 2000, which resulted in an action agenda for reform: *From the Margins to the Mainstream*. This report details the major reforms that need to take place in the US to increase the literacy levels and lifelong learning skills of 50% of the American population. The case study of the US provides valuable data on different forms of provision which utilise the family as an important part of the education process. Family literacy programs and workplace programs are the two major forms of literacy provision in the US.

Sweden was the country that had the highest levels of literacy according to the IALS survey. This case study illustrates how a long tradition of popularly based education for adults has resulted in a learning culture within Sweden with 80% of the population participating in some form of further learning. Of particular interest, in pedagogical terms, is the use of study circles in the adult education sector. Study circles provide an excellent model of informal ways of learning which could be usefully applied in Australia to engage those who lack the confidence or capabilities to engage in formal learning.

The fourth case study describes a 'movement' in Spain which has attracted strong international interest: Dialogic Literacy Circles. Participants in these circles generally have little education and few literacy skills, but they are able to engage with classical literature through a process of informal dialogue that is not teacher centred or academically structured. This case study models pedagogy of self-directed group learning. Of particular interest is the way in which these circles have contributed to the development of local communities.

The case studies of four quite different approaches provide valuable data and models that might inform future directions for literacy, numeracy and approaches to lifelong learning in Australia.

The key findings of this review suggest that urgent action is required in:

- Developing a language and literacy policy for Australia
- Addressing the issue of lifelong learning and the exclusion of disadvantaged groups
- Developing research proposals which explore the relationship between literacy and numeracy capability and lifelong learning
- Increasing the level of resources available for professional development of teachers to facilitate the development of new skills required for the 21st century
- Developing new pedagogies which will engage those currently excluded from education.

If Australia is to remain competitive in the global economy and maintain a degree of social cohesion, urgent action is required to ensure that the citizens of Australia are adequately prepared for effective participation in the Australia of the 21st century.

1. Introduction

Governments the world over are increasingly recognising that education and training are critical variables for economic competitiveness in the global economy. Investment in human capital is considered to be a means to achieving high rates of employment, economic growth and social progress. Literacy and numeracy proficiency is an element of the human capital equation and is central to the development of the skills and dispositions necessary for effective participation in work, civic and family life. Economic issues, however, are only one element of human life; the issue of social capital must also be addressed. Access to learning is of fundamental importance to social cohesion, in the context of the current unprecedented levels of social, economic, technological and organisational change.

In 2000, the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) conducted a review of international trends in adult literacy and numeracy policy and provision in a selection of countries. This review provided the context for identifying innovative programs and approaches that may be of interest in the Australian context.

In looking globally, the project aimed to:

- review international policy directions for Adult Literacy and Numeracy
- identify examples of innovative cutting edge practice that may be applicable in the Australian context
- strengthen links with adult literacy educators in other countries to enable future dialogue and investigation of issues of mutual concern.

The scope of this review is, however, limited by the time and resources made available to the endeavour, and therefore can only provide a few snapshots of activity around the globe. It will, nevertheless, give a sense of the possibilities for international collaboration in addressing the need for a concerted effort in adult literacy, and hopefully, stimulate further research in this area.

It was important to frame the review within significant debates and issues of importance to Australia in the current context of rapid change. This review is therefore contextualised within the broader discussion of what it means to be literate, where Australia is positioned as compared with other countries in terms of literacy ability, why literacy is central to the concept of lifelong learning, and how we might further adult education in this country.

The first section of this paper will consider different definitions of literacy. This will be followed by a brief statement of methodology. Section two will outline the international context within which the analysis of the case studies of section three will be located, and section four will explore the lessons and challenges for Australia arising from this international review and examples of innovative practice. Section five contains recommendations about future directions for Australia.

1.1 Definitions of Literacy

To the average person in the street being literate means being able to read and write printed language. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) proposed a similar but slightly more sophisticated definition of literacy competence. To be functionally literate in the 21st century, one must have:

> *the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community — to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.* (OECD 2000: 10)

In denoting a broad set of information-processing competencies, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) definition points to the multiplicity of processes that constitute literacy in advanced industrialised countries. Definitions of literacy, however, are continuously changing as new literacies emerge. Computer based technologies, for example, require different ways of thinking, problem posing and solving, different organisational practices and processes, and new ways of communicating meaning through text, image and sound. They require new, higher order processes and increased levels of competence within existing approaches. Some even argue that the information processing skills required in the information age will transform notions of what it means to be literate (Lepani 1998). A broad definition of literacy is therefore required to incorporate the changing landscape of electronic communications, as well as understandings about what it means to be literate in a culturally diverse society.

Here in Australia the current most widely accepted definition of literacy is that of the Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL):

> *Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy which allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society.*
>
> (Senate Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training 1991: 90)

The inclusion of listening, speaking and critical thinking in definitions of literacy reflects not only the impact of technological change on methods of communication, but also deeper understandings about how literacy is acquired and developed. Being able to read and write, even the simplest texts, requires the integration of a range of processes. The inclusion of numeracy skills within definitions of literacy further complicates understandings of what it means to be literate in the information age. Literacy by this definition is also a social and cultural practice.

Literacy is increasingly used as an overarching concept to include spoken language, reading and writing, numeracy, diagramatic literacy, visual/graphic literacy, conceptual literacy and so on. In short, the information processing skills that are necessary for gaining meaning from a range of multimedia text formats,

hence the use of terms such as computer literacy, visual literacy, political literacy, cultural literacy and economic literacy.

These changing definitions indicate that literacy is more than a set of information processing competencies that can be defined and acquired in a neatly prescribed fashion. Literacy is a social practice that evolves and develops in a diversity of social and cultural settings. The concept of multiliteracies acknowledges literacy as a practice that involves the negotiation of cultural and linguistic differences. *The globalisation of communication and labour markets makes language diversity an ever more critical local issue.* (Cope and Kalantzis 1997)

Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997) argue that the conjunction of economic globalisation, sophisticated communication technologies and national and global cultural diversity make more complex literacy capability a necessity in one's personal, civic and working life. Further, they argue, literacy as a key capability is essential to understanding social change and its implications for the social political and cultural life of a robust participatory democracy.

Developed theories and definitions of literacy are thus essential to the process of identifying innovative programs and good practice. Whilst the economic imperative of higher order functional literacy skills might underpin the interest of governments and organisations such as the OECD, achieving increased levels of literacy capability is dependent on a more complex view of literacy.

Australia has been at the forefront of much thinking about literacy and is unique among English speaking nations in its efforts to develop a comprehensive national policy on language (Lo Bianco and Freebody 1997). It is important, therefore, to examine in some detail the assumptions underpinning international directions in education and training, lifelong learning, and the place of literacy within them, to better understand the significance of the examples of innovative practice described in this paper.

1.2 Methodology

Much of the material for this paper is data gleaned from a Web search of the major organisations dealing with literacy and basic education issues in a selection of countries — Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Sweden.

The OECD Web site has been used extensively as it provides up to the minute accounts of educational research being conducted in member countries, as well as discussion papers of international significance. Many reports can be accessed in PDF format from government and non-government organisation Web sites in the countries studied. This means that the data is quite current and topical.

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and other government and non-government Web sites have provided information about current directions in education and training in this country.

International electronic discussion lists have been used to include dialogue from within the adult literacy field in order to identify issues of importance to

program providers in the selected countries, and those involved with the development and delivery of programs. Some contacts have been made through participation in these discussions.

International conference papers in adult education and literacy have been sought through the adult literacy network. Significant international contacts have been made through attendance at conferences and via the ALNARC network.

Presentations of the findings of this review at two international conferences held in Australia during 2000 provided valuable feedback and discussion around the issues raised in this paper. In addition, a literature search of relevant papers has been conducted in major educational journals.

2. The International Context

2.1 Learning: The Treasure Within

The Delors report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, *Learning: The Treasure Within* (1996), demonstrated the importance of learning to the individual in all aspects of social participation, including work, community and family life. Widely applauded as a visionary document, it provided an internationally unifying philosophy on the value of lifelong learning. While the concept of lifelong learning has been embraced by many governments in the western world, the overriding emphasis, in terms of policy development and programs, has been on improving vocational pathways to improve economic performance and competitiveness in a global economy through vocational education and training. The Delors report provided a broader view of the value of learning.

At the same time as the Delors report was released, the OECD began the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the largest survey of its kind, conducted by the OECD in twenty different countries. The final report, *Literacy in the Information Age* (2000), has provided sobering data on literacy levels in the major English-speaking countries and elsewhere. The data and analysis suggest that provision for the continuous development of literacy, numeracy and information technology skills of all citizens in member countries is a high priority for the 21st century. The survey concluded that literacy skills are significant variables in the economic potential of a country.

2.2 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

In addition to the IALS, the OECD research program has included an investigation into the pathway options for young people, investigating educational attainment, school retention rates, youth unemployment levels and post-school participation in education and training. The comparisons made between different countries are useful in identifying the variables that may make a difference to the inclusion of young people in labour markets around the world. The analysis to date has identified significant differences in how youth unemployment is being addressed in a number of developing countries. The Nordic countries, for example, have successfully increased the participation rates of young people in the work force through significant investment in education and training and managed pathways, with extensive collaboration between the education sector and industry (OECD 1998).

The OECD's involvement in adult literacy and labour market research is a direct result of the increased competitiveness of the global economies, and the need to address the education and training requirements of the 21st century in the face of historically unprecedented levels of rapid technological, social and organisational change. The commitment to the concept of lifelong learning reflects the increased awareness that continuous education and training is required in both formal and informal settings in order for citizens around the world to participate in the information age.

Despite the geographic, cultural and historical differences between many OECD countries, there are strong recurring themes that emerge in policy statements on education and training. There is widespread recognition that a more highly educated workforce is essential for survival in the global economy, and that education and training are key to achieving that outcome. OECD research continues to focus on the issue of educational attainment, government expenditure and policy, in relation to investment in human capital to further economic growth and stability. For example, OECD Educational Indicators note that Korea has the highest proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) spent on education of all the OECD countries, and this correlates strongly with the economic growth of this country (www.oecd.org/education). Social cohesion and increased participation in civic life are seen to complement the economic benefits of increased levels of educational attainment.

The OECD research program therefore provides valuable data for policy makers in Australia.

2.3 Emerging Themes

This review of some of the international trends in adult literacy is therefore very timely, in the light of the comparative data emerging from the OECD surveys. It is necessary to think globally in inscribing the place of literacy in Australia in the 21st century.

Adult education and training is firmly on the agenda in most countries in the world, but there are many different perspectives and approaches, as well as important questions still to be resolved.

- What is the place of literacy in the policy agendas of the major OECD countries?
- What are some of the challenges in creating a more highly educated and skilled populace?
- What are the implications for literacy education within this more instrumental agenda?
- What kinds of literacy do we need for the 21st century?
- What might be considered 'innovative' practice in the context of such discussions?
- What can we learn from the approaches and practices of other countries?

In setting the international context, three significant policy strands emerge which will be reviewed in the next section. They are: the challenge facing policy makers in meeting the need for a learning revolution, who the participants of this

learning revolution will be, and the development of the skills and dispositions necessary for a learning revolution.

2.4 Lifelong Learning

A recurring theme in much of the literature surveyed on education and training for the 21st century is the concept of 'cradle to grave' education, with lifelong learning as the master concept underpinning all discussions.

2.4.1 Lifelong Learning: A necessary revolution

Whilst many of the ideas about lifelong learning are not new, there is a renewed sense of urgency to find ways of involving populations in learning and skills development in the current context of massive social and technological change. Many countries are recognising that the workforce will need to develop additional skills to cope with the higher order tasks they will be expected to perform. In the UK, the Blair Government has embraced the concept of lifelong learning and has declared itself as entering the 'Learning Age'. The Blair Government has initiated a very ambitious program of overhauling the whole education system to create coherent 'cradle to grave' pathways, with a master learning grid connecting the elements of the whole. To direct this program, the UK now has a Minister for Lifelong Learning. Policy documents incorporate the altruistic goals of adult education and lifelong learning whilst recognising their value in building a stronger economy.

The concept of lifelong learning has become an issue of worldwide concern with many countries sharing common goals. The UNESCO report of 1972, *Learning to Be*, raised the issue of learning as a process that is inseparable from life. In 1996, upon the release of the Delors report, the European Parliament declared 1996 as the Year of Lifelong Learning. Numerous policy initiatives have followed from this declaration in many developed and developing countries. In the UK lifelong learning is the umbrella concept for new initiatives in education and training. In the US the competency standard frameworks incorporate skills needed for lifelong learning. In Australia the need for lifelong learning has become a matter of national urgency according to the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) report on lifelong learning:

> *Where once the concern was to secure a right for people to access, should they choose to, a range of learning opportunities throughout their lifetime, now the assessment is that it is no longer a choice. In that sense lifelong learning implies a 'necessary revolution', active involvement in which is an inescapable pre-requisite to surviving and prospering in the modern world.* (ANTA 1999: 8)

According to this paper the need for a change in focus in lifelong learning is predicated upon the following understandings:

- working in a 'learning economy',
- coping with the speed of change,
- redistributing the episodes of learning more sensibly across a lifetime of different work and leisure patterns, and
- the importance of social cohesion and avoiding social exclusion.

(ANTA 1999)

2.4.2 The Challenge for Policy Makers

There is an increasing emphasis in the literature that lifelong learning does not take place only in formal settings, but informally *at work, by talking to others, by watching television and playing games and through virtually every other form of human activity* (OECD 1996). These broader understandings of knowledge, skill and learning, provide an enormous challenge to policy makers. According to the OECD report on lifelong learning:

> *Because of its fluid, dynamic and cover-all character, lifelong learning does not lend itself readily... to the imposition of precisely specified government norms, controls and regulations, nor to the specification of a set of organizational, administrative, methodological and procedural criteria by which its progress and success may be measured.*
>
> (OECD 1996:90)

What is implied in the global call for lifelong learning and the transformation of education, is the need for new pedagogies, innovative programs and multiple approaches to learning. Recent research (Sticht 2000) about how people learn, including psychology, cognitive psychology and neuroscience, demonstrates the complexity of how reasoning, problem-solving, skill development and knowledge are acquired. This research has given rise to concepts such as 'effective learning environments', which are learner-centred, knowledge-centred and community-centred.

These theories on learning provide even greater challenges for policy makers attempting to instigate a 'learning revolution' because, not only are many of the qualities of lifelong learning hard to quantify, measure and evaluate, but also there is still considerable debate about how to develop these qualities.

2.4.3 The Lifelong Learner

A central concept of lifelong learning is the notion of the individual as an autonomous, self-directed learner. Candy (1991) details the attributes of a self-directed learner, yet the concept of the model learner, who is self-directed, methodical, disciplined, reflective, self-aware, curious, open, motivated, interpersonally competent, responsible, and able to master new concepts with developed information seeking and retrieval skills, suggests superhuman transformations that belie the realities and challenges of fostering and developing such dispositions.

A recurring theme in nearly all writings about the adult literacy classroom

is the need to redress negative experiences of schooling and build the students' confidence and self-esteem as a learner. Implicit in this endeavour is the application of methods that offer different models and approaches to learning.

For example, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) data (1998) seems to confirm that the love and capacity for learning seem often to be educated out of children as they progress through the schooling system. The report suggests that the structures, processes and delivery methods of schools alienate young people from the learning process, so much so that, in Australia, school retention rates have become a matter of concern. The development of a 'learning culture' would therefore require significant attention to understanding current attitudes towards learning and well thought out strategies for redressing resistance to further involvement in formal learning. Lifelong learning requires a willingness to keep learning.

ANTA declared in its recent paper that there is a need to *stimulate passion among Australians about acquiring new skills and knowledge throughout their lives* (ANTA 2000). Such statements assume that Australians already have the basic skills necessary for 'acquiring' new skills and knowledge throughout their lives.

2.4.4 Lifelong Learning: How will it be achieved?

In much of the literature on lifelong learning the vision for a learning culture seems to presuppose a literate and numerate population, with little analysis or apparent understanding of how these skills can be developed in adults. The development of literacy and numeracy capability and confidence in adults is an extremely complex and problematic area, yet basic skills seem to attract scant attention in the literature on lifelong learning, which tends to focus more on the indisputable benefits of lifelong learning to the individual, economy and society.

Whilst this new attention to lifelong learning is largely driven by the pressures of globalisation, rapid technological and organisational change, the concept of lifelong learning is built on an understanding of the value of social capital and social cohesion. Visions of a learning society encompass images of more effective and fulfilled families, individuals and communities. Such visions, however, must also address the practical issues of how such a cultural revolution might be realised. Difficult questions must be asked:

- How will the literacy and numeracy needs (underpinning knowledge for lifelong learning) of the population be addressed?
- How is literacy to be theorised in the context of lifelong learning?
- What kind of pedagogies do we need to drive such a cultural shift in perceptions of education?
- What are the most effective strategies for changing pre-existing paradigms of learning?

These are difficult questions and receive scant attention in much of the literature on lifelong learning, yet there is significant research and evidence on the failure of schools to 'educate' (Harris 1982). The ACER findings mentioned earlier add weight to the argument that Candy's model of the self-directed learner represents

an idealised and somewhat unrealistic image of the average adult learner. Who will the self-motivated lifelong learners be? The unemployed and those already marginalised from education? Or will it be the employed middle class who already have the skills and interests to pursue lifelong learning who will gain new skills and move on to bigger and better things? If the unskilled and marginalised are to be included, what are the implications for the way programs and pedagogies are developed?

The issue of a pedagogy for lifelong learning has been addressed to some extent in Victoria with the document, *Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities. A Conceptual Framework for Further Education* (Bradshaw 1999). This document defines eight lifelong learning goals that are synthesised into four key principles: multiplicity, connectedness, critical intelligence and transformation.

> *These four principles, indicators of quality further education, work together interdependently, whatever the topic, subject or discipline. In practice, learners and teachers assemble alternative perspectives, explanations and possibilities (multiplicity); then together they make connections between these and beyond these (connectedness); as well, they ask questions about these (critical intelligence); all the while learners and teachers consolidate by determining and taking thoughtful action that makes a difference personally, locally, nationally and/or globally (transformation).* (Bradshaw 1999: 25)

These principles correspond closely with the notion of developing self-directed learners. It provides a conceptual map that teachers can use for developing curricula that has a lifelong learning focus and incorporates adult learning principles. Implicit in such approaches are literacy practices which build upon the formal and informal experiences of constructing literacy capability through active engagement in the learning process. The concept of lifelong learning is therefore inextricably linked with the process of developing literacy capability.

2.4.5 Lifelong Literacy

Literacy and numeracy, as defined earlier, indicate the essential practices that underpin all lifelong learning. The process of becoming more literate is crucial to the process of education. To 'educate' means to draw out the potential of the individual, and literacy in this broad sense is the tool to achieving that end. It underpins the development of all the necessary qualities for effective participation at work, in the community and in the home.

The case studies of innovative practice in this paper will illustrate a number of different approaches and pedagogies that might facilitate the development of a learning culture. Most of these approaches embrace the concept of lifelong learning and literacy practices.

As literacy is fundamental to lifelong learning, much more attention needs to be paid to the concept of 'lifelong literacy', and therefore strategies for explicitly developing literacy in the process of education and training. Literacy is

an ongoing process, acquired through learning experiences encountered in daily life, both formal and informal. Participation in family, work and community requires different kinds of literacies, which develop and evolve throughout life.

More attention must be paid to developing programs and pedagogies that acknowledge difference, diversity and multiple approaches to learning. Given the large number of people in our society who do not readily participate in further education and who do not have the necessary basic skills to effectively participate in further education, such pedagogies must take into account the realities of achieving a 'passion for learning' or 'lifelong literacy'.

However, the goal of increasing access and participation in further education requires a detailed understanding of the levels of competence in the basic skills and the prevailing paradigms of learning within the community.

2.5 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

The IALS includes data on 20 OECD countries: Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Norway and Slovenia, and was published as a report *Literacy in the Information Age* in June, 2000. This is the largest comparative literacy survey ever conducted, and more countries have been experimenting with the IALS measures since then. As can be expected in such a broad survey, encompassing socio-cultural, economic, political and historical differences of many countries, the comparisons are necessarily limited by these complex variables. Nevertheless, the report attempts, through a range of indicators, to measure literacy skill, which is defined as:

> *The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community — to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.* (OECD 2000: 10)

The assessments were conducted to measure proficiency within a framework of three domains of literacy skill:

- Prose literacy — texts, news, brochures, manuals;
- Document literacy— job applications, payroll, maps, tables etc.;
- Quantitative literacy — arithmetic, order form, balancing cheque book.

Five levels of literacy were assessed from very poor to advanced.

Level 1 indicates persons with very poor skills where the individual may, for example, be unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information printed on the package.

Level 2 respondents can deal only with material that is simple, clearly laid out, and in which the tasks involved are not too complex. It denotes a weak level of skill, but more hidden than level 1. It identifies people who can read, but test poorly. They may have developed coping skills to manage everyday literacy demands, but their low level of proficiency makes it difficult for them to face novel demands, such as learning new job skills.

Level 3 is considered a suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society. It denotes roughly the skill level required for successful secondary school completion and college entry. Like higher levels, it requires the ability to integrate several sources of information and solve more complex problems.

Levels 4 and 5 describe respondents who demonstrate command of higher-order information processing skills. (OECD 2000)

These levels are similar to benchmark levels in the Australian National Reporting System (NRS), however the OECD assessments do not include writing activities. The survey does however, demonstrate how well people read the texts used in the assessment, which does shed some light on the literacy capabilities of the citizens of the countries surveyed.

2.5.1 IALS Results

As mentioned earlier, the OECD definition acknowledges that literacy underpins the necessary skills for lifelong learning. Whilst the methods and definitions of this survey are open to contestation on a number of levels, there is widespread agreement that the IALS survey has produced significant information.

The report provides valuable data for identifying countries that have higher literacy levels and discusses the complex range of cultural and economic variables that might influence literacy skills in given countries.

The following table provides a summary of the ranking of literacy levels in 15 of the 20 countries surveyed.

Table 1: Literacy Levels of OECD Countries

Country	Level 1 Skills (prose)	Level 4/5 Skills (prose)
Sweden	7.5%	32.4%
Norway	8.5	17.6
Denmark	9.6	6.5
Finland	10.4	22.4
Netherlands	10.5%	15.3
Germany	14.4	13.1
Czech Republic	15.7	8.4
Canada	16.6	22.7
Australia	17.0	18.9
Switzerland	17.6	10.0
Belgium	18.4	14.3
New Zealand	18.4	19.2
USA	20.7	21.1
UK	21.8	16.6

(OECD 2000: 156)

This table shows how each of the countries performed at level 1 (the lowest level) and at level 4/5 which is considered to be the level required for effective participation in the societies of the 21st century. The figures show that nearly one in five Australians have such poor literacy skills that they have difficulty coping with the increasingly complex demands of the information age. Even in the Nordic countries, which are ranked at the top of the list, literacy is still an issue for at least 8% of the population.

The report provides an analysis of educational achievement compared with literacy levels, and concludes that there is a strong correlation between the levels of educational attainment and the literacy levels of the adult population in any given country. A number of other variables were also considered in the comparative analysis in an attempt to look for causal relationships between factors such as age, gender, parents' literacy level, other languages spoken, participation in adult learning or cultural and civic life, and their relevance to the literacy level demonstrated. The report has also attempted to take account of the social, political, cultural and economic complexities of measuring and comparing the skill levels of citizens in different countries.

Educational Attainment

Not surprisingly, in all countries but three, the number one predictor of literacy proficiency is educational attainment. Australia is one of the exceptions, where non-native language status is the most important determinant of literacy proficiency rather than educational level.

The findings draw a strong causal relationship between the distribution of income and educational attainment, and hence literacy levels. The report often refers to the social and economic policies of the Nordic countries when considering variables that might lead to higher levels of literacy:

> *Countries striving to reach the same mean literacy level as the Nordic countries could focus on efforts to reduce inequality in the range of literacy scores, for example, by raising the level of adults with a brief formal education and, particularly, of youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds.* (OECD 2000: 59)

Economic Variables

Another very important finding from the analysis is the relationship between literacy level and participation in the workforce. The incidence of unemployment decreases as the level of literacy proficiency of workers increases. As can be expected, higher levels of literacy also correlate strongly with participation in skilled and white-collar occupations. These results reflect the socio-economic benefits of higher literacy competence. In summing up the writers conclude:

> *There is a vast literature that tackles the issue of economic inequality and the different factors that may cause it. The factors that have been analysed include, amongst others, earnings distribution, education policies, social and labour market policies and labor force structure. To the extent that the distribution of human capital in a population is a factor in income inequality of that population, literacy distribution has a role to play.*

> *However, there can be a causal relationship in the other direction: higher degrees of income inequality can cause unequal investment in education and literacy skills.* (OECD 2000: 78)

The authors raise a very important point here when they suggest that investment in education and literacy can cause even greater inequality. Recent debates in this country regarding the level of government support to private schools may help to illustrate this point. If the research team were to look only at gross figures on expenditure for education and literacy, as a proportion of GDP for example, they would not necessarily get an accurate picture of the potential impact of that expenditure in raising the literacy level or education level of marginalised groups.

Other Benefits of Education

The authors go on to suggest that literacy has other direct and indirect returns for societies, and that there are causal relationships between high literacy, greater social cohesion and better health. However these comments are not necessarily based on the findings of the survey, but rather represent a hypothesis drawn from analysis of the data.

Most of the report's overall findings are not surprising and confirm common understandings of the relationship between literacy, education attainment, and participation in the workforce and civic life. The relative success of some countries, notably the Nordic countries, in achieving high levels of literacy and educational attainment is however worthy of further investigation. The distribution of wealth, and government educational policies are considered to be significant factors in the equation, and the authors suggest that these variables are very important in the comparisons between different countries.

2.5.2 Conclusions and Implications

The IALS survey provides evidence in support of the economic and social benefits of higher levels of literacy, but these findings have not been widely disseminated. Nor has there been a great deal of discussion in the public domain, in this country, about the implications of these findings for Australia's future. The report offers valuable data for policy makers wishing to develop literacy policies for the 21st century, and raises many questions about how such policies might best be implemented in the current economic, social and political environment.

A number of difficult questions arise from the IALS conclusions. For example, how can governments measure the direct and indirect benefits to society in having a more literate population? Does the social good conflict with the economic good? If wealth distribution is such a significant variable in literacy levels in a country, do governments have the will, capacity or support to redress that inequality? What policies, pedagogies and programs would best achieve the need for lifelong learning in the information age?

Here in Australia, we are geographically removed from many of the developed countries surveyed, yet there is scope for comparative study and collaboration. What can Australia learn from the countries with higher levels of literacy? And how might we work with those who are at a similar level and who have similar socio-cultural political systems? Identifying these trends throughout the world is a massive task and clearly beyond the scope of this overview. Australia does not stand out in the OECD data as a country that is at the forefront of the education revolution, but it has often provided leadership to educators across the globe in the past (OECD Indicators at a Glance — www.oecd.org)

It is clear from the IALS survey that even countries with the highest levels of literacy have little cause for complacency with regard to providing citizens with the skills necessary for lifelong learning. The report states that higher levels of literacy skill are necessary for effective participation in the information age. It analyses some of the indicators that appear to contribute to a more highly skilled populace, but does not venture into the specifics of how this might be achieved.

Governments clearly have a responsibility to develop strategies, policies and programs that enable effective participation of citizens in the information age. Educators have the task of providing governments with models for how that might be achieved. The following case studies of four different countries illustrate what some other countries are doing in relation to the challenges of these new times.

3. Innovative Approaches in Four OECD Countries

The case studies have been selected to reflect the changing definitions and expectations of literacy, both in terms of the impact of new technologies as well as concepts of lifelong learning and vocational education and training. They are not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of international directions in adult literacy and numeracy, but rather as a stimulus for further research in this area. Four countries have been selected: Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom and Spain, all of which provide interesting comparative data on how the issues of lifelong learning and literacy are addressed. Each of these case studies illustrate the complex challenge of establishing effective lifelong learning pathways within the established education system of a country.

The US and the UK have been selected because they are both English speaking countries with which Australia has strong historical, cultural, political and economic ties. Current policy directions in this country, for example mutual obligation and competency-based approaches to education and training, are very similar to approaches in the UK and the US. Australia often refers to developments in these countries as a benchmark for its own activities and policies.

Sweden was of interest due to the IALS findings, which ranked the Nordic countries amongst the most literate nations in the world. There has been considerable interest in Victoria in the Swedish adult education system, after the Minister for Post-compulsory Education and Training, Lynne Kosky, visited there in June 2000. As the IALS report suggested, the policies and practices of adult education in Sweden provide a very good model for countries wishing to improve the skills of their citizens.

The Spanish program was included due to international interest in the innovative practices of the Centre for Social and Educational Research at the University of Barcelona (CREA) who have been promoting their ideas in a variety of international forums. This program was of particular interest because it addressed the issues of access to learning and developing a love of learning.

The Swedish and Spanish programs are also of interest because they provide models of delivery which focus on listening and speaking as well as print-based literacies. Further, they have arisen from neighbourhood renewal and community building programs. Such approaches might therefore not only inform the kind of pedagogy that is needed to meet the broader definition of literacy required for the 21st century, but also the challenge of developing more effective communities, workplaces and individuals.

3.1 The United Kingdom — The Learning Age

3.1.1 Policy Initiatives

The current Prime Minister of the UK, Tony Blair, came to government with the electoral mantra 'Education, Education, Education'. Blair's Green Paper, *The Learning Age* (1996), outlines his Government's vision for a radical transformation of the education system in the UK. This paper embraces theories of lifelong learning and social capital, in an attempt to meet the challenges presented by economic globalisation, increased competitiveness, and the higher order skills required for the information age. Drawing heavily on the philosophy of *The Third Way* (Giddens 1996), Blair's Green Paper argues strongly that there needs to be a cultural shift in England towards developing a love of learning:

> *The development of a culture of learning will help build a united society, assist in the creation of personal independence, and encourage our creativity and innovation. Learning encompasses basic literacy to advanced scholarship. We learn in many different ways through formal study, reading, watching television, going on training courses, taking an evening class, at work and from family and friends.*
>
> (Blair: http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/greenpaper/ch0000.htm)

The Learning Age

The learning age is therefore intended to build foundations of excellence to benefit the individual, business, communities and the nation. To this end Blair promised to establish individual learning accounts based on the following principles to:

- Expand further and higher education
- Make it easier for firms and individuals to learn by creating the University for Industry and launch it in late 1999
- Invest in young people so that more continue to study beyond 16
- Double help for basic literacy and numeracy skills for adults
- Widen participation in and access to learning
- Raise standards and learning
- Set and publish clear targets
- Work with business, employees and their trade unions
- Build a qualification system that is easily understood. (Ibid)

The Green Paper is an important foundation policy document that underpins reforms currently under way in the UK. Numerous reports have been commissioned to give an overview of education in Britain and this has led to the National Grid for Learning which attempts to link provision within all sectors of education from primary through secondary and higher education.

The National Grid for Learning

The National Grid for Learning (http://www.ngfl.gov.uk/) provides access to a range of learning provision and links to agencies throughout the UK. Many of the government initiatives are focused on data management and ensuring that information is made available to increase access and participation. At the time of writing these networks are flourishing and there is a complex variety of pathways to access information about employment, education and training.

Individual Learning Accounts

The Individual Learning accounts are also a key feature of the government's vision for a learning society. As a means of providing incentives for people to undertake learning throughout their lives, Blair has promised to provide supplementary funds for those who invest in their own education. Currently, greater incentives are offered for those undertaking computer training or maths programs, while participants engaged in employer requested training are not eligible for any supplement. There are some problems with the implementation of the Learning Accounts due to these restrictions, and the government needs to market the idea further with the general public (Fryer 2000).

The Moser Report (1999) provided sobering data on the level of participation by adults in further education in the UK. The report found that those most in need of further education were less likely to seek further education options, be they in training or basic skills. The individual learning accounts did not provide sufficient incentive to increase participation by those groups less represented in adult education courses. The most under represented groups appear to be the less well educated and literate members of the population.

Basic Skills Agency

The Basic Skills Agency is the major organisation representing adult literacy and basic education in the UK. They have written several reports to the government (Moser 1999) outlining the needs of the 22% of the population identified by the IALS survey as having very poor literacy skills. The Moser report highlighted the lack of interest amongst employers in addressing the basic skill needs of workers as a key challenge. Further, it indicated that there are few suitable materials for literacy development that are appropriate for adults. The need for a framework that links basic skills into work tasks and standards is also suggested.

The report highlights the need to promote the use of new technology in the development of these skills and cites a number of current projects that are attempting to utilise the best elements of multimedia technologies in developing materials that can be used in community colleges and workplaces. These materials, they believe, will provide the necessary resources to stimulate further developments in literacy and numeracy.

Challenges in Implementing New Policy Initiatives

The challenges facing the UK in implementing the visions of the Green Paper are considerable due to a complex range of factors which arise as a result of the social, cultural and economic history of the UK. The class system has given rise

to what Professor Bob Fryer (2000), describes as the 'learning divide' which has given rise to the 'qualification divide', the 'literacy and numeracy divide', and the 'who gets learning at work divide'. In short he argues, the 22% of the UK population who scored the lowest IALS ranking are the most disadvantaged people in the country but have the least access to and participation in learning that might benefit them. Fryer, who was Blair's chief adviser on lifelong learning, cites the following as the main challenges facing the UK in terms of achieving a lifelong learning culture:

- barriers of time, cost, opportunity and information
- persistently narrow conception of learning
- low levels of self-esteem and confidence in some adults
- overall, insufficient people actively participating in and committed to learning post-school
- marked and unacceptable social class and age differences of participation, achievement and qualification
- major problem of literacy and numeracy
- absence of common standards and quality provision for literacy, numeracy and other key skills
- need for more responsiveness and flexibility of supply
- inadequate employer support, provision and commitment.

These challenges have meant that the government has been unable to implement all of its reforms as first planned. Many of these challenges have however been addressed with ongoing policy development.

Further Developments

There has been continued development of policy and strategies for achieving the ambitious aims of the Green Paper. In the second report, *Creating Learning Cultures: Next Steps in Achieving the Learning Age* (Fryer 1999), the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education (NAGCE) further elaborates on the need for lifelong learning and some of the implications of current practices. It details the importance and scope of family learning and a strategy for neighbourhood renewal. It examines the concept of citizenship and building curriculum and programs in this area.

This report has contributed to the establishment of the *Sure Start* program, which targets remote communities and disadvantaged families. The reforms therefore are wide ranging and aim to redress the disadvantages experienced by marginalised groups. Other programs specifically for youth and the unemployed are also being developed.

The most recent policy initiative on developing literacy and numeracy skills is *Skills for Life — The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills*, which was released in December 2000. A key initiative arising from this document is the implementation of a Basic Skills Strategy Unit, resulting in a significant increase in funding to adult education. As the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) reported:

A 9 per cent increase in recurrent funding for community-based adult

> *learning in England for 2002-03 was announced by lifelong learning minister Malcolm Wicks on January 30th 2001. This takes funding for such work to a record £167 million. He also announced a capital investment by Government in local adult education facilities — the first for many years.*
>
> (http://www.niace.org.uk/news/default.htm)

The money is intended to help adults in disadvantaged communities get back into education and to help them with their literacy and numeracy skills.

NIACE warmly welcomed the increase in funding, but was quick to point out some of the shortcomings of the Literacy Strategy. Their concerns largely focus on issues of inclusiveness and a general concern with an oversimplification of the issues at stake. In particular they cite the needs of youth, speakers of languages other than English, the disabled, older adults and families. They also raise concerns about the shortage of teachers and the poor training and conditions of existing teachers (http://www.niace.org.uk/news/default.htm).

Many of the issues they raise reflect the disparity between government policy and the practicalities of implementation. These concerns will be considered in more detail in the light of the key innovation arising from the Blair Government's reform agenda for education.

3.1.2 The University for Industry

The University for Industry (UFI) was launched in August 2000, and is considered to be the flagship for many of the reforms taking place in the UK. It is perhaps the most ambitious initiative of the UK Government in terms of investment in new technologies to co-ordinate and connect the various elements of the 'learning revolution'.

The project has created a network of local, regional and national stakeholders, including companies, voluntary agencies, the BBC, the NHS, Sunderland City Council. The project is funded through public and private resources.

Whilst the project intends to use the Internet and World Wide Web technologies as the cornerstone for its activities, there is acknowledgement that potential learners want face to face help, if only to help them get started and work through manageable units of work. Some of these units of work may be conducted online while others will be completed in one of the many learning hubs that will be linked to the National Grid for Learning.

Key Features of the UFI

LearnDirect is the brand name of the UFI and will deliver the primary service of the UFI and coordinate the network. It is thought to be the first port of call for potential adult learners who will have their needs assessed and advice given about the best learning opportunities available. A sophisticated computer called a 'virtual engine' supports the call centre with a courses database and immediate enquiry and registration facilities. Using the Internet, a range of instant statistics are provided, such as learners' details and progression routes. Generally, LearnDirect will refer people to existing courses and learning materials but,

where there are gaps, they intend to act as a catalyst for the development of new materials and the customisation of existing materials to meet individual needs. This is to be done in partnership with education and training providers, employers and employees, business representatives, local authorities, trade unions, publishers and broadcasters and voluntary community organisations.

Learning Materials: The intention is to utilise new technologies to produce materials which are engaging, appealing and of the highest quality. They will be predominately self-study materials for distance learning or learning that is mediated through support. The UFI is currently commissioning the development of materials in a variety of media from traditional print, through courses which include videos and audio, to exclusively digital formats delivered via CD-ROM and the Internet. There is acknowledgement that different people prefer different media and different methods of learning. Audio-visual materials, for example, are seen to be very effective for low level readers. Digital TV is seen as offering a potentially powerful medium for learning.

Learning Centres: A network of UFI-endorsed Learning Centres across England, Wales and Northern Ireland will offer learners a high quality, accessible and secure point of entry into learning and advice about learning. They will have three core roles:

- To offer a public access point to UFI services.
- To provide local learning facilities (especially PC work stations) to learners who lack facilities at home or at work.
- To be a focus for delivering UFI learner support services.

These will be based in convenient locations, such as shopping and leisure complexes, as well as colleges, schools, universities, libraries and community centres. They will be the public face of the UFI.

Learning Centre Hubs: The learning centre hubs are intended to gain economies of scale in the management of the overall network. The hubs will:

- lead the establishment of Learning Centres across their region or area
- provide support and networking services for Learning Centres
- provide a concentration of Key UFI-related skills and services in their region or area.

Some of the hubs will be specially created legal entities while others will be less formal arrangements with a chosen lead body. However all hubs will have to meet the core requirements of the UFI and promote a unified style of operation.

Priorities

The UFI sees its priorities for the first few years to be in areas where there is the greatest need:

- Information and communication technologies
- Basic literacy and numeracy skills
- The needs of small and medium sized businesses
- Specific sectors: automotive components, multimedia, environmental technologies and services, and distributive and retail trades.

(UFI 1999)

Making lifelong learning relevant to the workplace is clearly a primary aim of the UFI.

Teething Problems

Some disquiet has been expressed on the discussion list of the UFI. Some people question the effectiveness of online learning for adult literacy students. There is concern about the industrial conditions for online teachers and how they will be paid. Training and professional development will significantly impact on the quality of provision. There is, therefore, a degree of anxiety about how the whole system will work and whether it will achieve its goals.

In discussing these issues with Professor Bob Fryer, director of the UFI (2000), it became evident that many of the initial plans have not yet eventuated. The logistics of implementing many of the initiatives are proving cumbersome and difficult. In particular, many of the plans to develop basic skills in the online environment are still in the developmental phase.

The *Skills for Life* strategy launched in February 2001 addresses some of these issues:

> *The University for Industry, which under its brand LearnDirect provides access to innovative and high quality courses, over 80% of them online. LearnDirect aims to help up to 200,000 learners to participate in basic skills learning by 2003-04.*
>
> *The national network of LearnDirect centres will expand to 1000 by April 2001, in which individuals can gain access to information on learning opportunities and learn online. National Training Organisations (NTOs), should give literacy and numeracy skills a high priority in workforce development plans. NTOs should also facilitate, with the Learning and Skills Council, the wider establishment of group training arrangements and other collaborative networks of employers, to ensure that training costs are minimised.*
>
> (Skills for Life — National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy, 2001)

The government is clearly committed to making the 'Learning Age' a reality and has recently (1st March, 2001) provided additional funding of 1.5 billion pounds over the next three years to address the literacy and numeracy skills of its citizens. Funding will enable all adults who have literacy needs to access free classes. The unemployed will be given incentives to upgrade their skills. However, as mentioned earlier, the issues for adult learners are extremely complex and require some sensitivity. It remains to be seen how this latest round of funding is to be implemented and whether it will take account of the concerns expressed within the field of adult education and literacy.

3.1.3 Disparities between Policy and Implementation

There is considerable debate in the UK about changes that have occurred in the classroom as a result of policy directions to standardise literacy provision. According to Hamilton and Merrifield (2000), the development of the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) has seen funding concentrated in Further

Education Colleges at the expense of community programs. There is increased emphasis on vocational outcomes and standardisation which has resulted in more *targeting, screening, classifying of adults in programs* often to the exclusion of marginal groups.

Such debates are clearly very significant to the implementation of government policy and reflect the need for input from practitioners and experts in the field. Even when the government has the basic vision and a willingness to invest significant capital to achieve these ends, there is a complex range of issues to address in order to ensure that the investment effectively targets the areas of greatest need. Technology might appear to offer solutions to many of the challenges facing the UK, in terms of access to education, but the medium has constraints. Many practitioners have expressed concern at the level of investment in technologically-based solutions to the problem of literacy and basic skills (http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/ufi-lifelonglearning.html).

The Needs of Learners

Fryer (2000) expressed similar concerns, citing the preoccupation with qualifications and certification, the overemphasis on skills for employment, and the *reification of the needs of the labour market,* as having potentially dangerous consequences for social cohesion and might inhibit the effectiveness of the reforms. Further, he argues, the pervasive sense of obligation and imposition — the 'naming, shaming and labelling' of the disadvantaged — may further alienate reluctant learners.

Pedagogical and theoretical issues are relevant to these concerns. Limited and restricted conceptions of 'learning' and 'basic skills' can lead to disparities between policy and implementation. The concerns of those more closely involved with the delivery of programs resonate with the issue raised in the earlier discussion on lifelong learning and the findings of the IALS survey.

Hamilton's (2000) work on vernacular literacy points to the many everyday practices that demonstrate literacy and the ability to learn. However these skills are not necessarily valued or acknowledged in government policy. NIACE has suggested in its response to the *Skills for Life* report, that there are many community initiatives currently under way which have the long term goal of raising literacy skills and a commitment to learning, and build on this notion of vernacular literacies. They argue for a more realistic time frame in the government's requirement to have measurable outcomes for its expenditure.

The Promise of Technology

The launch of the UFI will prove to be very interesting as the UK, along with many countries, is investing large amounts of capital in the hope that new learning technologies might facilitate ongoing and cost-effective lifelong learning. These initiatives require critical examination in terms of their effectiveness for low level learners, particularly adults.

Thorpe (2000) takes up many of these issues. In particular she questions the accessibility of these technologies for significant numbers of the population. Whilst new technology might provide the means to increasing access to learning

for working people who have limited time, or those in isolated situations, the costs of the new technology are beyond the means of the most disadvantaged groups. An additional barrier for learners with low levels of literacy and negative attitudes towards learning is the perception that technology is for 'clever' people.

Such attitudes will influence the success of the UFI and other reforms, so it will be very informative to track the progress of these initiatives in the UK over the next three years.

3.2 The United States — Family Learning

3.2.1 Policy Context

In 1990 the president and governors of the US made the following declaration that:

> *By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.* (Summit 2000)

This declaration led to the National Literacy Act of 1991, which spearheaded increased attention to addressing the literacy and numeracy needs of the populace. There were significant increases in the level of funding for family literacy programs, which constitute a strong focus of literacy programs in the US, from $14.5 million in 1990 to $150 million in 1999. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 has led to the consolidation of over 50 employment, training and literacy programs.

Many of the initiatives, especially the American version of the National Reporting System (NRS), closely mirror initiatives in this country. Askov (2001) reported that the authors of the American NRS had in fact used the Australian framework as a model for their own work.

As with the UK, the US Government has promoted the notion of vocational skill development alongside the broader aims of education as a means of creating stronger communities, healthier families and more fulfilled individuals. The Equipped for the Future Framework (EFF) includes competency statements for communication skills (including literacy), decision-making skills (maths and problem-solving) interpersonal skills and lifelong learning skills such as research skills and using technology. It is an attempt to develop the range of skills necessary to work and be trained, to participate effectively in family and community life in a rapidly changing world.

Despite the renewed efforts of the past decade, the goal of eradicating illiteracy by the year 2000 has not been achieved. The IALS Survey shows that 20% of the US population is at the lowest level on the IALS. Some 50% of Americans are below the required level for functionality in the Information Age.

The National Institute for Literacy

The government funded National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) has been a central focus for putting adult literacy firmly on the agenda in the US. It provides advocacy and advice to government about adult literacy issues. The NIFL attempts to bring a degree of coherence to a very diverse field, which is spread

over many states, all of which have local educational management. The NIFL Web site contains a comprehensive network of resources, links to adult literacy organisations, a number of national discussion lists, a research archive and general information on current developments (http://www.nifl.gov).

NIFL promotes a united national approach to adult literacy in the US and spearheaded the National Literacy Summit 2000.

The National Literacy Summit

The first National Literacy Summit was held in the US in February 2000. The process was planned and carried out by a steering committee which included the National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NSCALL), the National Coalition for Literacy (NCL), the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and the US Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE).

The first stage of the process convened leaders from adult education, literacy and other related fields for a two-day intensive meeting and planning session. This meeting began the process of building a national consensus on how to move adult and family literacy forward in the 21st century. Further regional meetings were conducted throughout 2000. The summit document set a new and more realistic goal: *By the year 2010, the United States will be among the most literate nations in the world.* The benchmark is to have 70% of the population on National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) level 3 and above. (The NALS corresponds with IALS level 3). This would be a significant increase over the IALS score, when only 53.5 percent of the American population scored level 3 or better.

Access and Participation

Access and participation are also issues in the US with only 8% of adults with low skills enrolled at any given time in federal and state supported adult education and literacy programs. Many people are not even attempting to access the available services, which makes it difficult for educators to argue for increased funding to meet the needs revealed by the survey data. In fact, a recent study revealed that only 5% of American adults believed they had insufficient literacy to participate in everyday life (Sticht 2000), whereas the IALS survey suggests 20%.

There are a number of social and cultural factors creating this anomaly of perception and reality. The most disadvantaged groups are the Blacks and Hispanics who tend to form their own communities where they live, separated from the mainstream society (Sticht 2000).

Debate in the Field

The Summit process has stimulated a great deal of activity on the NIFL discussion lists. One astute observer, upon hearing President Clinton's declaration of a $3 trillion surplus in the budget, came up with the catchy slogan *1 percent for literacy*, which she believed might be a more effective tool for progress than 20 national summit meetings.

There is also considerable debate about the pedagogical implications of the new NRS and Equipped for the Future Framework (EFF) Standards for Adult Literacy and lifelong learning. Some have expressed concern that the new requirements for assessment, measurement and evaluation accountability measures compromise the relationship between teachers and students, and undermines the power of informal learning in adult settings.

These discussions seem also to resonate with concerns expressed in the UK and here in Australia. The adult literacy and numeracy fields in all three countries place great emphasis on the relationship between teachers and learners in the learning process. While pedagogical approaches may vary, the underpinning principles of adult learning seem very consistent.

An Action Agenda for Literacy

The Summit process has resulted in the publication of an Action Agenda for Literacy that has the following key priorities:

- A system of quality services for adult students
- Ease of access to these services
- Sufficient resources to support quality and access.

(National Literacy Summit — *From the Margins to the Mainstream. An Action Agenda for Literacy, 2001*)

The action agenda addresses issues of basic skills for effective participation in work, family life, and as citizens. The three key priority areas provide the framework for a detailed set of actions which should be initiated. These action proposals closely match the intentions of the UK National Strategy *Skills for Life*. The report, however, is distinctive in that it acknowledges the need for participants to be involved in the process of shaping their own educational futures and the need for program goals to reflect the concerns of all stakeholders in the community.

The action agenda also builds on existing provision within the US and strongly emphasises the strengthening of existing programs and new directions and developments within them. It is not clear, however, whether the government will endorse this action agenda of the literacy field or provide the funds to make it a reality. In effect, the Summit action plan is a first step in developing a national policy and action plan for adult literacy in the US.

Technology features prominently in this report which highlights the digital divide in the US where over 48% of college educated individuals have Internet access as compared to 6.3% of individuals without a high school diploma. These figures concur with some of the findings of the IALS survey in relation to the disadvantages experienced, in all aspects of life, by those who have less education. The digital divide in the US reflects the same kinds of inequalities evident in the UK.

The action agenda therefore makes a number of recommendations about increasing access to technology and increasing funds to literacy providers to build up their technological resource base. A series of recommendations are made about integrating computer literacy into family literacy programs.

3.2.2 Adult Literacy Provision in the US

Adult learners in the US are served by a variety of providers, with the majority of participants enrolled in programs provided by local agencies. Many participants also attend programs in libraries, community colleges, community-based organisations, non-profit organisations and correctional facilities (Summit 2000).

Adult education and literacy providers generally offer three primary types of provision:

- Adult Basic Education (ABE) provides instruction to adults with low literacy skills
- Adult Secondary Education (ASE) provides instruction that leads to a high school certificate such as GED — the final year certificate
- English for Speakers of Other Languages.

The two major elements of provision are family literacy and workplace literacy.

Family literacy provides integrated educational services for families, including adult education for parents in conjunction with early childhood education for their children. Services also focus on developing parent's knowledge and skills as their children's first teachers and encouraging active involvement (Seaman and Seaman 2000).

Workplace literacy provides basic skills instruction for workers either at work sites or in community settings. Participants include 'the working poor', immigrants, high school dropouts, people with disabilities and welfare recipients. The majority of participants are either young people or adults in their prime employment years. The majority are either Hispanic or white, with blacks, Asian/Pacific Islanders forming the minority (Summit 2000).

3.2.3 Family Literacy and Whole Service Provision

In the past ten years family literacy programs have received a great deal of government support ($150,000,000 in 2000) and appear to be having significant outcomes for many participants (Seaman and Seaman 2000). Whilst family literacy programs are administered by the states, the federally funded *Even Start* program has four common components: early childhood education (ECE), adult education, parent education and parent-and-child time together (PACT). Families also receive one home visit per month where the educator provides assistance within the home environment.

Family literacy programs have a very structured schedule which enables practitioners from across the country to share information via the NIFL family literacy mailing list. A typical schedule is as follows:

- families come on a school bus, city bus, or by private automobile;
- parents and children have breakfast together;
- parents attend adult education classes while their children choose a learning centre in the early childhood classroom;
- after about three hours, parents and children come together for PACT (parent and child time) where parents learn how to teach their children and

work with them at home;
- families have lunch together;
- after lunch, the children rest while their parents attend parent education classes;
- in some programs, parents volunteer in the school while the children play;
- families return home.

It is estimated that there are at least 800 such programs operating in the US (NIFL 2000). In seeking an exemplary Family Literacy program, Sondra Stein from the NIFL cited the Canton City Schools *Even Start* Program as one which had won national awards for their innovative work in the area.

The Canton City Schools Even Start *Program — Ohio*

Canton's Even Start program (Meyer 2000) is built on existent school district and community resources. The school district's community education department provides career assessment and academic/workforce development education. The Department of Human Services assists with recruitment of families and funds childcare for children under 3 and wraparound care. The local paper donates free papers for learning activities. Community business partners help motivate students, fund incentives and awards, and provide shadowing opportunities for parents to explore careers. Mentors from the community college assist in classes and the Ohio State Extension Service provides nutrition and home making lessons.

In response to welfare reform, Canton's *Even Start* is focusing on work-based education. In Ohio welfare recipients must participate 30 hours weekly. The first 20 hours must be work or job readiness activities. The remaining 10 hours may be additional work or adult education. Parents participate in real work experiences in and around the elementary community. Development of communication skills, interpersonal skills, decision-making skills, and lifelong learning skills are emphasised during these work experiences. Academic skills are taught in context, as they are needed for the students to fulfil their roles as parent, worker and citizen (Meyer 2000).

An individual Career Plan is developed with each student to identify a realistic initial job, future career goals, and a plan for reaching these goals. The process begins with career assessment and continues with work-based learning activities. Career development activities including mentoring, job-shadowing, career exploration, and development of a career passport assist the student in preparing to attain and maintain initial employment. Reunions, a weekly post-employment support group, assists graduates in maintaining employment and balancing the responsibilities of family and work.

Outcomes of Family Literacy Programs

Family literacy (or 'intergenerational literacy') programs have been functioning since the early 1980s in the United States. Until the past five years however, there has been a paucity of research data to substantiate positive outcomes from those programs. The first comprehensive report of findings from family literacy programs was by Hayes (cited in Seaman and Seaman 2000) which analysed

data from families who had been gone from the program for up to six years. His findings about the parents who left the program included:

- a high percentage achieve high school equivalency after leaving;
- a significant percentage obtain and retain employment;
- participants continue to enrol in education and training programs; and
- participants become more self-sufficient and reduce their dependence upon public assistance.

In Texas, staff members of the Texas Centre for Adult Literacy and Learning (Seaman and Seaman 2000) have become external evaluators for 16 of the 64 *Even Start* programs in the state. Their findings, based on observation of classes, surveys of parents, interviews with staff and pre- and post-test data, reveal that significant outcomes occur, including the following:

- many parents became more interested in education
- their employment rate increased
- wages increased. (Seaman and Seaman 2000)

Such outcomes suggest that there is potential for developing Family Literacy programs as part of a national literacy strategy in Australia. Despite the critique that Family Literacy programs are based on a 'deficit model' of literacy (Auerbach 1994) the evidence of positive outcomes in the US warrants further consideration of the Family Literacy approach by policy makers in Australia.

Family Literacy programs already function in a number of settings in Australia. Schools have involved parents in reading programs and tutorials on how to help their child to learn to read. There is an accredited Family Literacy program in Victoria that is designed for delivery in community houses and centres. However, the US Family Literacy model would need to be adapted for Australian conditions and integrated into the practices of existent adult literacy programs.

3.3 Sweden — The Learning Circle Democracy

3.3.1 Policy Context

There is a long tradition of adult education in the Nordic countries and an established practice of lifelong learning. Sweden has a long history of a popularly based system of decentralised education and course activities. Sweden's late Prime Minister, Oloi Palme often called Sweden 'a study circle democracy' which reflects the policy context of adult education programs. This commitment to adult education has resulted in significant levels of participation:

> *With somewhere between 40 and 50 percent, depending on the estimate, of the adult population participating in some form of adult education, and with constantly increasing demands on the 'system', the learning society is no longer a poetic phrase but a reality.* (Rubenson 1993: 53)

Government policy on adult education in Sweden has historically recognised the importance of popular education in the development of a love of learning. Many of the visions for a learning age, espoused by Blair in the UK, correspond with

the assumptions that have underpinned adult education in Sweden for many years. The practice of democracy is central to government policy. Popular education is regarded as essential to a healthy democracy because it:

- stimulates democracy, equality, and international solidarity and understanding;
- starts from the individuals own voluntary search for knowledge;
- is characterised by democratic values and cooperation;
- aims to strengthen individuals ability to influence their own life, and to be able, together with others, to change society in accordance with their values and ideals;
- helps provide all, but particularly the educationally disadvantaged, with good basic knowledge, and helps stimulate further search for knowledge.

(Government Bill quoted in Rubenson 1993: 54)

Furthermore, despite its long tradition of adult education, Sweden still has a literacy problem, with at least 8% of Swedes experiencing serious literacy difficulties. The IALS survey (2000) showed that 7.5% of the Swedish population are at level 1 in the prose scale. However, 32.4% function at the advanced level of 4/5. No other country in the survey achieved this level of proficiency in the higher levels; Finland and Canada were the closest with 22.4% and 22.7%, respectively achieving the 4/5 level. Sweden's high literacy levels seem to reflect the learning culture described by Rubenson. The lower levels of literacy reflect an influx of people from other countries (OECD 2000). Literacy in Sweden therefore has a strong emphasis on migrant language programs. Native speakers who have poor literacy generally have some kind of learning difficulty and are given remedial assistance (Letrud 2000).

In terms of pedagogy, Sweden is considered to be progressive and liberal, as is the Australian education system. Adult learning principles are very similar in Sweden to here in Australia. Michael Christie (1993) provides a fascinating comparative analysis of adult education in Sweden and Australia, and argues that there are more similarities than differences in philosophy and approach. The key difference is that Adult Education is not the Cinderella of the Swedish Education system and receives greater funding and support and is more firmly embedded in the social system. Jan Hagston, writing about a recent trip to Sweden where she visited an adult education classroom, was struck by this similarity (Hagston 2000). Swedish practice is therefore of considerable interest to Australia.

3.3.2 Programs

The basic structure of adult education in Sweden remains the same despite a move to more vocationally-oriented and competency-based training programs in recent years. There are two major organisations that are involved in providing adult education in Sweden:

Study Associations arrange shorter and longer courses in a range of different subject areas, including everything from theoretical studies to vocational training. They also arrange cultural events, lectures, as well as study

circles in art, music, painting and theatre. All activities are organised close to where the participants live and work. Any individual, or group, can take the initiative for devising and facilitating different activities.

The study circle is the most important aspect of *folkbildning* (adult education), a concept which originated in Sweden and has a long historical tradition. The concept provides a model for informal learning based upon dialogue around issues of mutual interest. The study circle group is autonomous and self-directed and builds its knowledge base through equal participation in dialogue. No grades are given in the study circle. This form of education often works as the first step on the way to further education.

Folk High Schools are run to a large extent by popular movements and non-government organisations. Folk High Schools are managed by local authorities and county councils. There is no standard curriculum and each school makes its own decisions regarding teaching plans. The students' experience of working life and society are put to good use. The first Folk High School in Sweden was established in 1868 and today there are 136 of these schools in the country (Hagston 2000).

The traditional freedom of the Folk High School has led to ample experimentation and innovation. Problem-oriented and thematic studies for longer or shorter periods are quite common. In subjects like English and mathematics, there is usually some kind of level-grouped teaching, which makes it possible for each student to start from his or her level of competence. An important part in many of the schools is the boarding element. Studying and living at school gives possibilities for close companionship and the chance to exchange views during free time (Christie 1998).

Tuition is free of charge at Folk High Schools and the schools are open to all adults over 18 years of age. Studying at these schools is, for many, the first step on the road to higher education or a new career. An unemployed person with incomplete education is able to study for three years to gain the skills necessary to enter work, without financial hardship.

3.3.3 Innovative Program — The Study Circle

The Swedish term 'Folkbildning' encompasses the notion that education and knowledge for all helps the society as a whole. This concept underpins the adult education sector in Sweden. There are now over 200,000 individual study circles in Sweden with approximately 1.5 million Swedes attending. This represents nearly a quarter of the adult population in Sweden. The Swedish Government spends A$500 million on this non-formal adult education, which reflects the importance of this movement to the government's priorities (Larssen 2000).

The study circles grew out of a social movement in Sweden in the late nineteenth century in response to growing social problems and the need to provide workers with post-elementary education. They were closely linked to the trade union movement and were designed to overcome class conflict. The temperance movement was also instrumental in developing the culture of study circles as a means to overcoming the alcoholism within the community (Larssen 2000).

How Study Circles Work

The basic concept of the study circle is that it utilises the experiences of ordinary people as a starting point for exploring socially relevant concepts. The circles operate on a process of dialogue which is democratic and participatory. The circle has a facilitator who is trained, but who is not a teacher and is not there to impart knowledge in a traditional sense. The group, consisting of five to ten people, is provided with a study guide, reading material, slides, videos and other resources and a series of structured questions to work through. These materials are often written by a team of curriculum developers but can arise organically from within a specific organisation. The facilitator is there as an equal participant rather than as a teacher and the keeper of knowledge (Larssen 2000).

Through a process of collaborative dialogue the group is able to work through the study guide at its own pace and determine the way the group will proceed. Reflection, discussion and action are the primary focus of these discussions. This therefore involves people in an equal partnership in negotiating the direction the group will take, and enables individual interests to shape the study session, which is usually about twenty hours long with at least seven meetings. All members take an equal share of responsibility for ensuring that the studies are meaningful, however there are three specific roles participants may assume: coordinator, leader or member. The coordinator selects the reading material and organises the meetings. The leader (sometimes also the coordinator) leads the discussion and acts to maintain the focus and encourage equal and active participation.

The study guides are very important because they provide participants with a direction and input of knowledge beyond their experience. Although study guides vary from situation to situation, there are some commonalities in their approach. They are on the whole, brief and easy to read, with topics divided into sections to accommodate the length of a session (Brophy 1999).

The study circle is therefore a relatively structured process, but the participants learn in an informal manner about issues that are applicable to everyday life.

The study circle is based on the premise that people have an innate desire to learn, so that the experience of improving one's knowledge and ability to understand and interact with the world is sufficient reward in itself (Brevskilan 1980). Consequently, government funding for study circles is granted on the condition that it does not lead to a qualification. Study circles are also often overtly political, dealing with controversial issues, such as the use of nuclear power in Sweden, but are nevertheless actively supported by the social democratic government.

How Successful Are They?

The study circles have been operating in Sweden for over a 100 years and therefore are embedded in the educational culture of the country. Because they have not been concerned with qualifications as such, evaluations have sought to improve the practice rather than measure educational attainment. It is widely accepted that they do contribute to a range of learning skills, but their ostensible

intention in the Swedish context is to foster social solidarity and participation.

Swedish research has ascertained that some circles deviate from the espoused ideals because members can become passive or the leader may not fulfil their function correctly (Brophy 1999). The drop out rate is a factor and not all groups are able to reach a common agenda. Because the study groups are based on non-traditional methods of education, group dynamics play an important role in their success. If the group does not reach a mutually agreeable method of operating, the whole experience can in fact be counter productive. Successful study circles therefore require a commitment and belief in the philosophy underpinning the practice, that is, a collaborative, democratic, participatory and inclusive process.

Study circles have attracted attention from around the world, including the US and Australia. Attempts to implement study circles in the US have been evaluated by Oliver (1995 cited in Brophy 1999) who spent eight years exploring the study circle concept and ways of implementing it in the US. After attempting to measure the educational effectiveness of study circles, he concluded that it was difficult to measure these outcomes without overlooking the 'subtle and more sociological nuances' of the study circle, but that an evaluation of their potential might be assessed by asking other questions related to their capacity to lead to greater involvement.

The director of the Study Circle Resource Centre (SCRC), Leighninger , supports this view:

> *It would be a mistake to look at study circles only in the context of the outcomes that they produce. The success of study circles in fostering grass roots problem solving has attracted a great deal of interest from foundations and from government at every level.* (Leighninger 1996:39)

Study Circles in US and Australia

There have been a number of study circle initiatives throughout the US integrating the family literacy / parenting associations and the Trade Union movement. Of particular interest is the International Study Circles Project (http://www.tsl.fi/isc/edu1.html).

Here in Australia the study circle has attracted sporadic interest dating back to the 1980s, but has never been embraced in a comprehensive manner. There has been interest of late in the Swedish model of adult education and, after visiting Sweden in 1990 Peak observed:

> *The study circle has been the most successful means of providing non-formal adult education in a developed society...Whether or not the study circle model should or could be implemented in our country can be debated by adult educators.* (Peak 1990: 165 cited in Brophy 1999)

Adult Learning Australia (ALA)) has registered the name 'Learning Circles Australia' and has initiated several publications to foster the use of the study circle in Australia. A number of kits have been produced focusing on landcare issues and another on Aboriginal reconciliation. The Reconciliation Kit has been trialed extensively and is currently being promoted within the community sector

of Victoria. It is a very comprehensive kit that contains an abundance of resource materials and issues for discussion. Australian research on study circles is not as prolific as efforts in the US, but preliminary findings suggest that study circles have been seen as a worthwhile experience by the majority of participants (Shires and Crawford 1999). One criticism of the Reconciliation Kit is that the bulk of material is overwhelming and could be streamlined. The kit does, however, attempt to identify the full range of issues related to the reconciliation process. The Shires and Crawford report recommended that study circles be taken up as a professional development tool for service sector workers (particularly in health, employment, and training and social services). ALA has continued to promote the methodology of study circles in adult education contexts and has entered into the area of civics education.

Study circles in Australia have tended to attract people with an aptitude and interest in learning — about 85% come from professional or middle class backgrounds (Shires interview, 2000), so literacy has not really featured as an issue. However, the Law and Order Kit was used effectively with ex-offenders and sole parents, although a thorough evaluation has not been conducted and literacy and numeracy skills have not been assessed. Nevertheless, a cursory analysis of the reading materials and the questions asked suggests a reading level of at least NRS level 3, so the kits assume a functional level of literacy.

3.3.4 Democracy and Education in Sweden

The practice of democracy feeds the culture of learning in Sweden. Larssen (2000) suggests that the pursuit of a social democratic society has given adult education policies a focus, which underpins pedagogy and program development. Learning circles in particular, he argues, have the potential to facilitate active democracy. Further, he indicates that Swedish policy statements and pedagogical approaches reflect the ideas of John Dewey in his book Democracy and Education:

> *A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience...A government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated.* (Dewey 1916: 87)

As a democratic society, Australia must face the challenge of ensuring that the interests of the diverse cultural groups that comprise the Australian population are included in the life of the nation. The democratic and dialogic nature of the learning circle provides an appropriate forum for developing the literacy capabilities necessary for effective citizenship and community participation, particularly for marginalised groups of learners.

The final section on the Dialogic Literary circles provides another model of an informal approach to learning that is based on democratic dialogic principles. This case study will be followed by the final discussion on what Australia can learn from the four countries reviewed in this report.

3.4 Spain — Dialogic Literary Circles

3.4.1 Background Context

In the late 70s there was a 'renaissance' in adult education in Spain, which was a direct result of the end of the Franco dictatorship. Social inequalities were great and the division between rich and poor was reflected in the low educational achievement rates of the country. The IALS has Spain at the bottom of the scale in terms of literacy proficiency, and other OECD indicators show that almost 50% of the population do not have post-primary education. Women in particular have been excluded from education.

It has been difficult in the course of this research to obtain policy documents from Spain which have been translated into English. However, this case study has been included because the Dialogic Literary Circle movement is worthy of further investigation, in terms of the pedagogical principles that underpin the success of this program. The success of the Dialogic Literary Circles in facilitating the development of literacy by reading and talking about classical literature, has attracted international attention.

The cultural context of this practice is, however, very different to Australia, and the social and political history of Spain has created a society very different to our own. Nevertheless, the movement is worthy of some attention in the context of theories of lifelong learning and the process of engaging people who have little formal education, in the process of learning. Literacy, according to this method, develops through the process of dialogue.

3.4.2 Community Education

La Verneda Sant Marti is a school in Barcelona, Spain, that appears to have flourished in the more liberal environment of the late 70s. The school offers a range of activities including basic literacy, certification courses (secondary school equivalent), literature gatherings, computer science, painting, pottery, health, sociology, psychology, Spanish as a second language, and English for hotel business and tourism (Aroca 1999).

Egalitarian dialogue underpins the methods used at the school and there are strong theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, based on the work of Habermas, Beck and Freire. The philosophical approaches underpinning the pedagogy of the school are aimed at meeting the needs of the people they call 'the excluded', that is, people who have little or no formal learning and therefore do not have the skills or confidence to participate effectively in the life of the community.

> *During the late 1970s, the changes at La Verneda were part of the transformation taking place in adult education throughout Spain. At the time, adult education followed a compensatory education model designed for those who had not been able to attend school earlier in their lives. Educators and participants at La Verneda challenged the assumption that childhood and adolescence were the appropriate periods of life for learning.* (Aroca 1999: 323)

Aroca argues that La Verneda has enabled participants to take control of their own learning. The school has been going for twenty years, and in that time participants have been involved in developing networks with other adult education and community organisations. The networks developed by the participants at La Veneda have extended throughout Spain.

> *A few years ago, the participants association began meeting to organize discussions about the effects of the new Spanish educational reform in the field of adult education. They met with other participants associations in the region and created the Federation of Adults' Cultural and Educational Associations (FACEPA) which set out to make the voices of all the people involved in adult education heard.* (Aroca 1999: 333)

FACEPA is a cluster of community and adult education associations where the participants have a vote and representation. The members have *neither a university degree nor remuneration from adult education institutions* (Puigvert 2000), but they are strongly committed to developing community based, adult education programs in Spain.

FACEPA has drafted a Declaration of Adult Education Participants' Rights, which was presented to UNESCO's Fifth International Conference on Adult Education. Their goal is to draft an International Declaration, agreed upon by consensus by all adult education participants worldwide. FACEPA is overtly political in its commitment to promoting the ideas of the movement. These activities suggest that increased literacy capabilities have enabled participants to participate more effectively in social and political activities. Moreover, the participants actively endorse the practice of dialogic learning in their promotional activities.

3.4.3 Innovative Pedagogy: Dialogic Literary Circles

The Dialogic Literary Circles originally began in La Verneda-Sant Marti school for adults in Barcelona, Spain (Puigvert 2000). The success of the method has attracted interest from other European countries, including France, Denmark and the Czech Republic, where similar groups have begun operating. Harvard University academics have collaborated with a number of circles.

Dialogic Theory

The dialogic process enables people who often have little reading capability, the opportunity to read the classics of literature, from Frederico Garcia Lorca, Franz Kafka, James Joyce and Emile Zola. This literature is generally the domain of the middle and upper classes and inaccessible to *excluded working people with little education* (Puigvert, Sorde and Soler 1999).

The Dialogic Literary Circle (La Tertulia Literaria) is defined by three main characteristics: *a) the program targets adult learners with low literacy skills, b) the readings are universal classics, and c) the process is based on dialogic learning* (Puigvert et al. 1999). The process enables people who began with limited reading skills to demonstrate that they have knowledge and intellectual capacity for learning, reflection and discussion.

Participants have reported that they had found their voice in other aspects of their lives, both in their personal and civic *lifeworlds*. Dialogic learning transforms the relationships among people, and between them and their environments (Flecha 2000). The dialogic movement is based on the theoretical perspectives of Habermas, Beck and Freire, who view engagement in education in the classical sense as having the potential to be transformative for the individual and society.

The reading is collaborative and dialogic, guided by the following seven main principles:

- **Egalitarian Dialogue:** All members of the group are equal and their opinions equally shared. This draws on Habermas' theory of communicative action, where participants build their own interpretations from the arguments made. Contributions are valued according to the validity of those arguments rather than the status or authority of the person holding the view.
- **Cultural Intelligence:** As Freire argued, all people, whatever their age, share the capabilities of language and action, which can be developed further through interaction.
- **Transformation:** Dialogic learning transforms interpersonal, familial or work relations. All learning can be transformative.
- **Instrumental Dimension:** The development of skills and knowledge is more intense when it takes place in a dialogic framework.
- **Creation of Meaning:** Meaning re-emerges when interaction among people is guided by themselves.
- **Solidarity:** Collaborative work develops a sense of solidarity and support.
- **Equality of Differences:** People who come from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds should have the right to hold their own views and be treated as equal partners in collaborative learning. (Puigvert 2000)

Dialogic Pedagogy

The group is formed through an organic process of word of mouth or recruitment from established literacy classes. The group is given a theoretical overview of what the process entails so that the participants are familiar with the theories underpinning the practice.

The group selects a text which is drawn from the classics of literature; that is, books that have influenced cultural history and which also explore the lives of the *excluded* people. The group then slowly builds its reading of the text, either by listening to others read or reading small sections themselves. The facilitator asks each participant to read aloud a section that they liked and discuss the story and characters. *The book becomes the centre of the person's life for that week, as they discuss the story and ideas with family members and friends between classes* (Puigvert 2000).

The dialogic process is used to enable participants to equally express their opinions and analysis of the text. Participants are encouraged to actively contest 'literary' and 'academic' interpretations of the text. The facilitator has no literary

authority in this context, as the participants are free to interpret the text according to their own experience. Flecha (2000) maintains that this process enables the participants to place themselves at the centre of the learning.

> *The continuous experience of sharing ideas with the group helps to recreate overall meaning of the participants lives...Dialogic learning affirms that people create the media, the messages and the meanings of the messages in our lives.* (Flecha 2000: 18)

The dialogic method is based on the belief that participants bring knowledge, values, and personal experience from their own lives to the reading of a text. Dialogue is a social practice which engages participants in *transformative* learning.

The development of the Dialogic Literary Circles has been documented in the book *Sharing Words* (Flecha 2000). Each of the seven principles underpinning dialogic learning is illustrated with examples from the experiences of seven individuals. The stories told in this book speak of individuals who have developed literacy through reading classical literature. Their engagement has been stimulated by the desire to experience a life that has previously been inaccessible to them (Puigvert et al. 1999). Each character speaks of their own life and experience and how participation in the group has transformed their life and world-view.

The process of achieving literacy in this context is therefore both a deeply personal experience and an act of solidarity, one which is closely connected to one's position in the society, one's educational experience, work experience and engagement in the political process.

It is difficult as a researcher to get an objective sense of what is really happening in this classroom, based on the available literature. Outcomes are not measured according to competency standards, but rather, according to the pursuit of belief in the power of words to transform people's lives. However, according to the promotional materials of this group, illiterate people learn to read the classics through the process of dialogue. Many of these people have attended literacy classes that are also dialogically based, where they have learned the 'instrumental' aspects of literacy.

Much of the evidence for the success of this process is anecdotal, based on the reflections and observations of teachers. CREA has participated in the documentation of this movement, but has not gathered quantitative data that tracks the progress of participants in terms of literacy competence. The central elements of this approach to literacy development are story, dialogue and reflection.

Puigvert (2000) described the impact that participation in the Dialogic Literary Circle has had on the lives of a group of women who have had little formal schooling. Many of these women have transformed their lives, continued with their education and become more involved with their communities.

The success of the Dialogic Literary Circles in Spain has aroused a great deal of interest. However, it is unclear how strongly the particular cultural setting impacts on the effectiveness of the process. The movement appears to have taken

on a life of its own, and is not necessarily impacted upon by government policy. The dialogic process is a common feature in adult classrooms as it is an accessible medium for the development of new ideas and gaining knowledge from others.

3.4.4 Dialogic Literary Circles for Australia?

The literary circles of Spain are similar to 'book clubs' in Australia, where 8-10 people gather at each other's homes, libraries, or community settings and discuss a prescribed book. The central difference is that generally, people who participate in book clubs can read. The other difference is that one person does not necessarily take on the role of the facilitator/teacher. These groups usually only meet once a month and participants are meant to have read the book beforehand. A book club is therefore a possible means to incorporating the ideas of the Dialogic Literary Circles.

Learners read books in adult literacy classes as well, but these are often linked to other activities such as book reports, vocabulary and comprehension exercises and so forth. The dialogic process would change 'classroom' reading of texts because the aim is to discuss and interpret, rather than answer comprehension questions correctly, or complete an assessment task on the book.

3.4.5 Talking Texts into Meaning

Definitions of literacy incorporate spoken language because knowledge of spoken language is used to develop literacy skill in first language literacy. Although spoken and written language are different, in a linguistic sense they have a dialectical relationship with each other (Halliday 1985). To be literate, one must be able to understand and communicate ideas through the four macro-skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The principles underpinning the Dialogic Literary Circles talk about this relationship in a social and political sense, but the effect is the same; dialogue brings greater meaning to the text.

These ideas are not essentially new. Freire's approach to teaching illiterate peasants in South America was to build literacy from the spoken words of the participants. This is how children learn to read in the initial stages also, through listening and absorbing the language of written language. Lemke (1992) argues that we think in spoken language forms and that reading is a process of translating the written form into spoken language (thought) and then back into the written form. This process of translation, if made explicit to readers through a process of discussion, facilitates a deeper understanding of the text, and also builds an intuitive understanding of the difference between spoken and written language.

There is, however, another powerful dimension to the literary circles, and this is their emphasis on the literary classics. Hirsch (1987) argued for a return to a study of the classics. His argument was that Americans could not be truly literate unless they were familiar with the classical literature of their culture. His ideas were widely criticised by those who argued that the literature of the

dominant culture was not representative of the experience of the lower uneducated classes and that such literature was inaccessible. Hirsch, however, maintained that familiarity with these classics (for example, Shakespeare, Faulkner, Whitman) was *the translinguistic knowledge upon which literacy depends* (Hirsch 1987). Translinguistic knowledge refers to the many references to classical literature embedded in much contemporary writing. The true meaning of many texts cannot be fully penetrated unless one is familiar with the cultural traditions and concepts underpinning the text. The term 'brave new world', for example, is widely used by journalists and public analysts, but the source of that concept (i.e. Aldous Huxley's futuristic novel, or the original quote from Shakespeare) is rarely cited. In short, Hirsch argued that literature would provide disadvantaged Americans with the *cultural capital* they required to participate effectively in the different *lifeworlds*.

Such linguistic arguments are presented here to suggest that the Dialogic Literary Circles are based on sound principles and are worthy of further examination. What they might add to theories of literacy for the 21st century are ways of thinking about multiliteracies for different *lifeworlds*, where participants can negotiate the meaning of their lives with others. More than this, they provide an incentive for increasing reading capability. Whilst the principles underlying the dialogic circles primarily relate to theories of literacy as social practice, the effectiveness of the method can also be explained in linguistic terms. This idea is explored in some depth in the case study *Oral Language, a Window on Thought: Talking Texts into Meaning* (Suda 1994), which documents the implementation of such theories with a group of adult learners from diverse backgrounds. The dialogic approach is also of interest in the quest for developing a love of learning in the Australian population, as it fosters the active engagement of participants. Enthusiasm and motivation are critical factors to success in learning.

4. Lessons and Challenges for Australia

4.1 A Policy for Lifelong Learning

The global call for lifelong learning in the Delors report (1996) and the conclusions of the IALS survey (2000) in relation to literacy and numeracy for the Information Age present clear messages to Australia that these issues are matters of national importance.

In other research on lifelong learning commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Training (NCVER), the authors conclude that: *Australia lags behind leading European countries in responding to the challenge of lifelong learning* (Kearns, McDonald and Candy 2000). The report presents a compelling argument for why Australia cannot afford to continue this practice if it is to be a socially cohesive and economically prosperous nation.

The UK Government is taking the issue of lifelong learning and the development of literacy and numeracy skills very seriously. The US is also incorporating notions of lifelong learning into its vocational education planning and the government has increased its support for family literacy and workplace programs in the past decade. The Action Agenda signals determination within the field to address the issue of literacy and numeracy in the 21st century. The history of adult education in Sweden demonstrates how a long-term commitment to the practice of democracy has resulted in a culture of lifelong learning that is embedded in the policy and practices of the country.

The first lesson for Australia from these examples, is the importance of a national policy for lifelong learning which incorporates the views of all stakeholders. The NCVER research confirms this view:

> *There is no national policy for lifelong learning, and separate national goals exist for each of the sectors of education and training. The absence of a shared national vision for lifelong learning in Australia is a barrier to concerted partnership action towards this objective.* (Kearns et al. 2000: 2)

Another barrier the NCVER research cites is the issue of cost. Who will fund the learning revolution that needs to take place?

4.1.1 The Role of Funding

In the UK, Blair is attempting to forge partnerships with a range of stakeholders, including encouraging industry to invest in education and training. Learners themselves will be encouraged to have learning accounts supplemented by the government. Lifelong learning requires ongoing funding.

In Sweden, the success of the adult education system seems to justify the financial commitments of the government over a long period of time. As Rubenson suggests:

> *For reforms to be effective, good intentions and bold policy statements are not enough. Unless reforms are accompanied by major resource allocations, they seldom amount to much more than rhetoric.*
>
> (Rubenson1993: 54)

Adult education in Sweden receives more than the higher education sector and although distribution to various elements of the Swedish adult sector have varied, funding has remained constant and extremely generous by Australian standards. This is largely due to an additional adult education payroll tax, which was introduced in 1976, with the specific purpose of targeting the most needy and disadvantaged groups. Adult education is therefore an established aspect of the Swedish economy as well as its culture.

The Blair Government has acknowledged that massive expenditure is required and has committed significant funds to the development of its lifelong learning policies. The most recent commitment, as at the time of writing (March 2001), has Blair promising to spend 1.5 billion pounds on free literacy and numeracy classes for anyone who needs them over the next three years (a 55% increase on current levels of funding). However, the task is enormous, and it is unclear how effective this expenditure will be in addressing the complex issues entailed in increasing participation in further education, VET programs and especially literacy and numeracy programs. The marketing of this initiative is of critical importance as literacy and numeracy skills are matters of great sensitivity for those who are performing at the lower end of the scale.

The OECD report (2000) states that investment in education means investment in human capital and a more prosperous and socially cohesive society. Australia should take heed of such recommendations.

4.1.2 The Challenge of Negative Attitudes to Learning

A recurring theme in the literature on lifelong learning in the UK and US case studies is the negative attitudes that many people have towards learning. Kearns et al. (2000) regard these negative attitudes as a significant barrier to the progress of lifelong learning in this country. The ACER research cited earlier in this report maintains that schooling negates the natural desire to learn. These are significant challenges for policy makers and educators. The source of these negative attitudes must be understood and addressed if any progress is to be made.

Fryer (2000) argues that the Learning Divide in the UK is a product of class divisions, where the education system rewards people who have the required 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1973). Those who do not acquire the required cultural capital are excluded from the benefits that education provides. By contrast, Sweden's commitment and adherence to democratic principles has resulted in a long history of popularly based education that is inclusive of a diversity of interests and abilities (Larssen 2000). He argues that a healthy democracy requires equal access to education and knowledge, as well as participation in the cultural and political life of the society. However, the learning circles are an acknowledgement that there are different paths to achieving that end.

The adult education system in Australia is built on very similar principles to that of Sweden, as Christie has suggested. The learning circle in Sweden is an attempt to acknowledge the needs of adult learners and to make learning enjoyable and appealing. The basic principles of fostering equality and democracy, drawing on participants' knowledge, promoting cooperation and companionship, utilising dialogue and applying learning to concrete situations, are all strategies to provide a non-threatening learning environment. (Oliver 1987, Gibson 1998 cited in Brophy 1999)

These principles are similar in philosophy to the seven principles of the Dialogic Literary Circles: solidarity, egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, creation of meaning and equality of differences. The emphasis on dialogue acknowledges that learning occurs naturally in formal and informal settings through the process of identification and connection that happens in such collaborative group settings. The process of dialogue is seen as a central element in engagement with learning in both these methods. It is believed to lead to transformative action and a love of learning.

Widening participation in learning thus requires approaches which take into account the negative attitudes that people have towards learning, which are often a result of having been *streamed, creamed, graded and assessed* (Connell, Ashendon, Kessler and Dowsett 1982) in their schooling.

Different models of learning need to be considered, and care must be taken not to reproduce the kinds of learning that have resulted in massive educational failure in the past. Forcing people who have had negative experiences with compulsory schooling to engage in learning may be counterproductive. The type of environment for learning is therefore of critical importance.

4.2 Pedagogies for Lifelong Learning

What kind of pedagogies do we need to drive a cultural shift in perceptions of education? What are the most effective strategies for changing pre-existing paradigms of learning? Such questions presume a deeper understanding of the whole person's needs as a functioning member of society, as a parent, a worker, a member of the community and as a person who already has an educational history. A multiplicity of issues needs to be addressed and woven into a diverse range of approaches.

The adult education field in Australia has addressed these issues over many years, and there are numerous examples of innovative practice in the community and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sectors that provide basic general education for adults, including life skills and vocational education. Access and participation are ongoing barriers to the goals of lifelong learning in Australia, as they are in the US and the UK.

A Widening Participation Project in Yorkshire, England, is focusing on teaching and learning strategies for people who have difficulty with more conventional teaching methods. It aims to help adults and young people from hard-to-reach communities find their voice and motivation to learn through the

creative arts. Such approaches illustrate a willingness to experiment with learning to learn approaches.

Many learning circles in Sweden focus on crafts and hobbies as a means to building confidence in learning. A number of stories from the Dialogic Literary Circles tell of people who have gone on to further study as a result of the confidence gained in their own ability to learn through the dialogic process. Hamilton's (2000) work on vernacular literacies in the UK points to the possibilities inherent in informal learning.

The adult education field in Australia has developed many innovative approaches to addressing the needs of adult learners during the past decade. Much work has been done in recent years to explicitly name the kinds of learning that will further the capabilities of adult learners. The National Reporting System, the Certificate of General Education for Adults and the Conceptual Framework for Further Education provide frameworks, which incorporate the notion of learning as a lifelong process. However there is scope for further development, particularly in the area of informal learning. Whilst the accreditation process has created explicit benchmarks for adult learning which provide coherent pathways, many valuable informal learning experiences have been undervalued and excluded.

Lifelong learning implies ongoing learning that builds on each previous learning experience. A rich and diverse selection of education experiences with multiple alternative pathways to the next stage of learning is required. A diversity of approaches and opportunities, both formal and informal should be considered. The Learning Grid, which attempts to map learning opportunities for adults in the UK, provides an interesting model for how alternate pathways can be given equal consideration.

However, the IALS survey has revealed a further serious stumbling block for the lifelong learning agenda, with as many as one in five Australians who do not have the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, let alone the more sophisticated information processing skills required for the 21st century. These figures are a reflection of a complex range of issues to do with history and culture, entrenched attitudes towards learning, school practices, social and economic inequality and disadvantage. Education is but one element of the gap between those who have and those who do not. Literacy is of critical importance to addressing this complexity.

4.3 Lifelong Literacy for Learning

The UNESCO report, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, referred to earlier, was a global call for lifelong learning. UNESCO is now launching a United Nations Literacy Decade campaign to make lifelong learning for all a possibility:

> *Under this proposed UN Literacy Decade, UNESCO advocates a "renewed vision of literacy" and Literacy for All: children, young people and adults, in and out of school.* (UNESCO 2001: 1)

To this end, UNESCO has launched a worldwide consultation with both governments and civil society which is being done electronically, using email

and the Internet. The findings will be posted on the Web site (www.unesco.org/education/literacydecade) in May 2001, at the conclusion of the consultation. This global call for a literacy decade indicates that UNESCO recognises that literacy is crucial to the goal of lifelong learning.

Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997) advocate educational practice in which explicit literacy education is the province of *all teachers, at all phases of education and training, including life-long education for adults*. Their call for a broad notion of literacy that addresses the contemporary challenges in technology, cultural diversity and an internationalising economy, suggests that Australia should heed the UNESCO call for a renewed vision of literacy. There is scope here to broaden international collaboration.

4.4 The Literacy Challenge

Advocacy for a renewed vision for literacy is a logical progression from the UNESCO's lifelong learning campaign. As literacy is an element in all learning, citizens will need to continue to develop their literacy capabilities to meet the skills and knowledge required for effective participation in the Information Age. Lepani (1998) argues that basic literacy and numeracy skills represent a small part of the cognitive shift that will be required to interact and participate effectively in the technological societies of the future. Basic or functional literacy will not be enough. Higher order information processing skills will be required.

This is an extremely challenging scenario given that close to 50% of the Australian population would be unable to fulfil these higher order skills. The IALS level 1 and 2 competencies are still very basic, and do not address the intellectual demands of the sophisticated texts that citizens need to negotiate in order to effectively participate in the electoral process for example, let alone the multi-layered documents that Lepani describes.

The National Reporting System (NRS) framework in Australia goes some of the way in capturing the complexities of the literacy process by acknowledging the different genres and purposes of written and oral communication. It also provides a pathway for higher order skills. Similar benchmark documents have been produced in the US and the UK. However, in all cases, little guidance is given to teachers as to how the skills for lifelong learning and literacy are to be achieved.

4.5 The Adult Literacy Field

Whilst Australia may be lagging in policy initiatives, it does have the foundations for a strong adult education system, with an effective adult literacy field which has made significant progress in addressing pedagogical issues related to adult learning and literacy.

The focus in Australia has been on approaches that contextualise learning within broader frameworks. In the past decade there has been a move to deliver accredited programs of study that provide a broad framework for general and

vocational education. Literacy is seen as essential to effective participation in work, family life and civic participation. In Victoria, for example, the Certificates of General Education for Adults provide a framework for literacy, which includes literacy for knowledge, self-expression, public debate and practical (instructional) purposes. As well as a reading and writing stream, the Certificate includes an oral communication stream which attempts to develop competency at the spoken level. The General Curriculum Options stream offers a flexible approach to the development of essential knowledge and skills for lifelong learning, based on the Meyer key competencies (ACFE 1994). Similar curriculum documents exist in other states, and the National Reporting System has provided an overarching framework for assessment and reporting.

The emphasis on spoken as well as written literacy in definitions of literacy, has highlighted the need for explicit methods to foster oral language development, within a range of contexts and for a variety of purposes. The study circle model of Sweden and the Dialogic Literary Circles of Spain are, therefore, of considerable interest as they provide a methodology that could easily be applied for this purpose.

4.6 Dialogic Practice

Dialogic approaches have underpinned much theorising about literacy both here and abroad. Increasingly, numeracy teachers are highlighting the importance of oral language (Marr 2000). Dialogue is seen as an essential part of the process of learning to learn. It is the means by which the learner can reason and think, ask questions and refine the concepts required to absorb new knowledge and skills.

Flecha (2000) talks about the dialogue of the excluded, those whose voices have been silent. For learners who have little confidence in their own abilities, have experienced educational failure, for whom learning has been a mystery, dialogue is the process through which they come to trust what they know. This is a fundamental element of adult learning. Puigvert et al. (1999) argue that dialogic practice is especially important for adults because it allows them to negotiate and discuss with others the increasingly complex demands of life in a rapidly changing world. Moreover, they argue, new technologies have the potential to provide alternative spaces for people to meet and discuss the increasingly complex life choices they are asked to make. The shift towards greater individual autonomy in recent years does not obviate the human need to communicate with others.

The study circle methodology could offer a non-formal alternative to the mainstream classroom where assessment and measurable outcomes predominate. They may be effective in increasing participation in literacy and numeracy classrooms, particularly if they address issues of concern to the participants. The study circle method is therefore worthy of exploration as a means of engaging disaffected learners in the learning process. The Dialogic Literary Circles in Spain similarly encourage participants to direct their own learning and take control of their lives.

Dialogic practice therefore has merit on a number of levels, including the

potential to build social cohesion as a counterbalance to some of the de-personalising aspects of new technologies.

4.7 New Technologies and Online Learning

A recurring theme in the literature on lifelong learning and the policy documents discussed in the case studies, is the impact that new technologies will have on education. There is no doubt that these technologies (video, computers, software packages, CD-ROMs, the Internet, cyberspace communities, bulletin boards and email) will play a significant role in educational practice in the 21st century. The Internet in particular offers a wealth of information for those who have access to the technology and the skills to use it.

Governments the world over are investing heavily in online learning. The UFI in the UK is one example, but there are also many initiatives in Australia where great investment is being made in online learning. However there are many questions that remain unanswered with respect to access and equity issues for low-level learners (Thorpe 2000, Lepani 1998). The overall impact that these technologies will have on the societies of the future is largely unknown, and subject to much speculative theorising.

These speculations about a technological future highlight the potential of new technologies to be inclusive or exclusive of the more disadvantaged groups in the society. It is clear, however, that technology is transforming existing definitions of knowledge, communication and information processing. As Lepani suggests:

> *In the knowledge society with its informational mode of production, we all become researchers. However the language of this research is not just print, whether that be paper-based or electronic. It also includes complex visual language by which the media industry interprets our world to us — whether through news, info-entertainment, documentaries, music videos (MTV) or story telling.* (Lepani 1998: 5)

Not only do lifelong learners have to develop higher level literacy and numeracy skills, but also technical computer literacy, visual literacy, research skills, etc. The information rich knowledge society will reward only those who can confidently use a range of multimedia technologies. The implications for the one in five people who have poor literacy and numeracy skills is that they will be even more excluded if they do not develop computer literacy.

It is imperative, therefore, that computer literacy skills become another essential basic skill. The digital divide presents a clear menace, as Lepani suggests, for those who do not have access to the hardware or skills. The Action Plan for Literacy in the US acknowledges this fact very clearly, as do many of Blair's initiatives. In the UK, for example, Blair is providing generous subsidies for those engaged in computer related training. However, it is the most disadvantaged groups who have the least access to these new technologies, which presents a real challenge to the government.

4.8 Family and Community Learning

Another theme that emerges from the case studies is the place of families in the learning process. In the United States, family literacy has been the primary focus of adult literacy programs. In the UK, the inclusion of family learning and family literacy in the policy agenda is directly related to the development of a learning culture. NIACE is actively promoting the notion of family learning as a means to building stronger communities and a culture of learning.

There are family literacy programs in Australia, but there is little coordination or resourcing of this area of adult learning. The Howard Government's welfare reforms seem to be based on similar philosophies to the 'third way' policies of the Blair government in the UK, and the Family Literacy programs in the US. Mutual obligation seems to be the new mantra for welfare provision where recipients of benefits are seen to have some responsibility to give the community something in return. Such programs could be implemented in a way where both the recipients and the community benefit. For example, Family Literacy programs may be a suitable 'training' option for sole parents and unemployed people with children.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear that Australia, like many other countries, must confront the issue of lifelong learning as a matter of some urgency. Literacy and numeracy, the basic building blocks of lifelong learning, must be addressed with this broader context in mind.

According to recent research cited in this report, Australia has slipped behind in terms of meeting the educational needs of its citizens in the 21st century, despite a very strong and innovative, but under-resourced, education sector. Redressing this neglect will entail a comprehensive national strategy that is built upon the expertise of all stakeholders. The case studies raise a number of issues in this respect, and provide some insights and strategies on how this might be achieved, but the foundations already exist in the present structures of adult education in this country.

There are many lessons to be learned from the experience of the four countries discussed in this paper and from the other countries ranked highly on the IALS scale: Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, Germany and the Czech Republic. The dawn of the Learning Age in the UK is of particular interest because of the comprehensiveness of the strategy and the passion of those implementing this very ambitious program.

It was not the intention of this project to make detailed recommendations about future directions for Australia, based on a limited review of just a few countries. This project has been a virtual scouting expedition to identify some areas of possible interest. The data gathered so far does, however, point to the need for immediate action in the areas indicated below.

5.1 Policy

There is clearly a need for some kind of national strategy on lifelong learning and literacy. Such a policy would provide a national framework for addressing the literacy and learning needs of the population of Australia in the 21st century. A comprehensive approach would incorporate the following strategies. The policy should:

- be a collaborative and consultative process involving key stakeholders from all sectors of the adult education field;
- incorporate policies and directions from other sectors of education to develop a coherent national policy on literacy and learning from childhood through to adulthood;
- include key stakeholders in the related fields of health, welfare and employment.
- consider global trends in literacy and lifelong learning policy development as they may provide strategies and models which could be applied in Australia.

5.2 Pedagogy

- Lifelong learning pedagogies and a range of alternative approaches should be explored and implemented. Literacy capabilities should be explicitly embedded in the theory and practice of lifelong learning.
- Teachers need to be competent in the literacies needed for the 21st century. Computer literacy and online learning skills should also be incorporated into professional development programs.
- Pilot programs of different approaches to dialogic practice should be trialed in a variety of community, TAFE and industry settings. Appropriate professional development would need to be provided to effectively implement the principles of dialogic learning.
- Family Learning should be explored as it relates to existent practice.
- Innovative approaches for engaging reluctant and resistant learners should be explored.
- A professional development program that is both theoretical and practical is needed, to ensure that the complexities of learning in the 21st century are understood by practitioners. Teachers should understand the significance of incorporating literacy with lifelong learning in the contemporary context.

5.3 Research

There are clearly many issues emerging from this report which are worthy of further research both in terms of policy and practice. The following represent a few broad areas to consider:

- Online learning needs to be critically evaluated in terms of how effective it is with literacy learning. Comparisons between practice here and abroad could be very instructive.
- Follow up research on developments in the UK — how effectively is the 1.5 billion pounds being spent? How effective is the UFI as a model of online delivery? What kind of workplace literacies are being developed? Has participation widened? How are they managing the learning divide, training teachers, encouraging learners?
- There may be innovative programs in other countries which may be worth exploring e.g. Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, India.
- An evaluation of learning circle programs in Australia.
- Investigate how participation in literacy programs leads to other learning.
- Action research on a Dialogic Literary Circle pilot program in the community.
- How other OECD countries have responded to the IALS survey — comparisons with Australia.
- Collaborative comparative research with other countries, particularly the UK and Canada where there is considerable interest in developments in Australia.
- Develop a Web site where international and local researchers can post reports in PDF format to create an international archive of adult literacy research.

5.4 Resources

If Australia were to become a 'knowledge society' and launch its own Learning Age, considerable resources would be required to make that a reality. To achieve this, the government needs to:

- Devise a multiplicity of programs and approaches which should be employed to strengthen the provision of adult education and adult literacy, and provide pathways to further learning and training.
- Adequately resource such programs in order to include elements of action research for evaluation and professional development purposes.
- Provide adequate resources to meet the demands of new technologies in terms of access to hardware, software and training.
- Explore a range of funding sources, including industry.

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UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) (1972) *Learning to Be*, http://www.unesco.org/ (accessed August 2000)

6.1 Web Sites

(All URLs correct as at August 2000)

Australia

Adult Learning Australia
http://www.ala.asn.au/

Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium
http://www.staff.vu.au/alnarc

Australian National Training Authority
http://www.anta.gov.au

Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
http://www.detya.gov.au

National Centre for Vocational Educational Research
http://www.ncver.edu.au/voced.htm

Email Discussion Lists

Australia; Adult Literacy
http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc

UK — UFI Discussion List
http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/ufi-lifelonglearning/

US — Four Lists: Family Literacy, Technology, Policy, Disability
http://www.nifl.gov

Global

International Study Circles Project
http://www.tsl.fi/isc/edu1.html

OECD News and Publications
http://www.oecd.org/publications/observer/214/editorial_eng.htm

OECD Indicators at a Glance
http://www.oecd.org

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
http://www.oecd.org/

UNESCO Education Resources Database
http://www.unesco.org/education/aladin/index.html

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation)
http://www.unesco.org/
www.unesco.org/education/literacydecade

United Kingdom

Basic Skills Agency
http://www.basic-skills.co.uk/

Building Communities
http://www.communities.org.uk/

Department for Education and Employment
http://www.dfee.gov.uk/grid/challenge/index.htm

Lifelong Learning
http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/greenpaper/index.htm
http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/ufi-lifelonglearning.html

National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education
http://www.niace.org.uk/
http://www.niace.org.uk/news/default.htm

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy
http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/literacy/rapal/RaPAL.htm

The National Grid for Learning.
http://www.ngfl.gov.uk/

UFI (University for Industry)
http://www.ufiltd.co.uk/

United States

Family Literacy Organization
http://www.famlit.org/

Literacy Link — Penn State University
http://www.pbs.org/literacy/

National Institute for Literacy
http://www.nifl.gov

Study Circles Resource Center
http://civic.net/ACF/SCRC.html

Published by
Language Australia Ltd